

COUNTERING HEGEMONY THROUGH SYNTHESIS:
A LIFETIME OF COMMITMENT TO THE BLACK COMMUNITY
IN THE WORKS OF TONI CADE BAMBARA

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

I argue that Toni Cade Bambara's entire corpus works to meld the spiritual, artistic, and political as well as the activist and the community. This theme is contained in her essays, short stories, novels, and films, but is best demonstrated in her two novels The Salt Eaters (1980) and Those Bones are Not My Child (1999). The Salt Eaters agonizingly expresses tension between the spiritual, artistic, and political but in the novel this tension goes largely unresolved. Inability to resolve these tensions leads to the protagonist's suicide attempt and political factiousness within the Black community. Though the novel ends with the protagonist's healing, her future, as well as that of the community, is largely left open ended. Those Bones are Not My Child however resolves many of the tensions presented in The Salt Eaters. Those Bones are Not My Child narrows the boundaries between author and reader, activist and community. The novel, through its focus on actual events also collapses the divide between fiction and nonfiction, calling for the readers to incorporate the issues in the fiction into action in life.

I use four meta-themes as tools to examine the trajectory of Bambara's fiction and nonfiction as it meets the goal of achieving wholeness. These meta-themes are: countering cultural hegemony, accountability, resistance to false binaries, and reconstructing cultural memory.

This thesis makes a contribution to the field of Africana Women's literary criticism because it concerns itself with the complete corpus of Bambara's work. It seeks to look at Bambara as a whole, as a writer with diverse interests, talents, and evolved with time. This thesis situates her work within a framework set out by Bambara herself, one that centers Black women's voice and experiences and thus continues in the tradition she sets forth as a writer activist.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Billye Raushanah Cheré Smith was born in Toledo, Ohio, to Beatrice Lynette Smith and William Latif Mustapha on August 26, 1979. She was raised in Newark, Ohio by her mother, a school teacher, along with her younger brother Jamal. After graduating from Newark High School, where she was active in sports, orchestra, and the student non-racist organization, she went on to major in Black Studies at Amherst College. At Amherst she focused on African and Caribbean Francophone literature and spent her junior year abroad at the Université de Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal. At Amherst she was active in campus organizing and acted as Co-chair of the Black Women's Group, The Charles Drew Culture House, the Amherst Feminist Alliance, as well as the Student Outreach Center where she helped to coordinate a program linking Amherst tutor/mentors to El Arco Iris, an after school arts program for Puerto Rican Youth. The fall of her senior year her mother passed away and she began raising her brother after receiving her undergraduate degree. She later worked as an Education Organizer at The Anti-Displacement Project, a tenant's rights organization. After suffering severe burn out she worked at The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, a non-profit dedicated to incorporating contemplative practices into everyday life. It was during this time that she traveled to Myanmar to do in-depth Buddhist studies. Her experiences as both an activist and spiritualist spurred her interest in the intersection of activism, spirituality, and literature, which she went on to examine in graduate studies at the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University. While at Cornell Billye traveled to Salvador, Brazil to visit a fellow Africana student and increase her knowledge on a life-long interest in Yoruba spirituality. Upon graduating she plans to teach at the community college level and/or at a Historically Black College. Ultimately, Billye plans to pursue doctoral work in Africana Studies and literature.

This thesis is dedicated in memory of family members who have become ancestors:
Beatrice Lynette Smith, Hattie Elizabeth Smith, David Wayne Smith, Hattie Foster,
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Chapter One

Introduction

The life and work of Toni Cade Bambara reflect an unwavering commitment to Black people's liberation and especially to Black women's empowerment. Her expression "deep sight" can be used to describe Bambara's particular gift as a scholar, activist and writer. She inhabits a significant position: she is not only a seer who deeply perceives Black people's struggles but also a truth teller,¹ who is compelled to speak on them. Her observations serve to expose corruption and offer options for building a stronger community. "Deep Sight" is an expression that surfaces often in Bambara's work. One of the ways she uses it is to describe the ability of the African people who in numerous folk tales, accurately see and synthesize the past, present, and future. When the newly enslaved people saw the injustice awaiting them on the American shore, they took into account their past as self-determining people, their present abysmal existence on the slave ships and the future of indignity as slaves and took decisive action. They jumped overboard, and while their bodies anchored themselves to the bottom of the ocean with their chains, their spirits either flew or walked home to Africa (depending on the version of the story).

Toni Cade Bambara in Context

Biography

Born in 1939 in Harlem, Toni Cade Bambara received her college education at Queens and City Colleges. Bambara explains in "How She Came by Her Name," an interview with friend and film collaborator, Louis Massiah, that the link between community work and writing was forged early in her life. She gained much of this

¹ The phrase truth teller refers to a Nigerian belief that there are people whose role and duty it is to speak truth no matter the consequence.

education informally while growing up in New York City. Bambara credits her training as a “community scribe,” the instruction she received by her mother, and lessons gained at Harlem’s speaker’s corner as crucial to her development into a writer-activist. As a young woman she was recruited by community members to write impromptu letters, contracts, and minutes. Her interaction with community members as “scribe” served to encourage her talent in writing and move her to direct this talent to serving the people. Her mother encouraged her to be a critical thinker and a creative person. Bambara acknowledges the important role that her mother played in encouraging her to counter racial encouraging her creative potential when she dedicates The Salt Eaters to her “first friend, teacher, map maker, landscape aide Mama... who in 1948, having come upon me daydreaming in the middle of the kitchen floor, mopped around me.”² A part of the radicalized education from her mother involved challenging her White teachers who demeaned Black people in the classroom.³ Bambara also writes that much of her political consciousness is the result of growing up in a highly politicized time surrounded by a powerful form of public independent media, namely that of the Speakers Corner in Harlem. She was profoundly affected by growing up in the 1940s as a part of a politicized family. She recalls numerous rallies, Black bookstores, and the Speaker’s Corner where Black people could hear representatives from various political and cultural groups deliver their platform, such as members of the Sanctified church, trade unionists, communists, socialists, Abyssinians, Muslims, and West Indians. This experience shaped her greatly and contributed to her commitment to Black people’s politicized voice and countering dependency on popular media.⁴

² Toni Cade Bambara, dedication, The Salt Eaters (New York: Random House, 1980)

³ Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: First Vintage, 1999) 219.

⁴ Ibid 214.

Bambara went on to work as a New York City Welfare Investigator, a freelance writer, and a Program Director at a New York City community center. She was an activist in The Civil Rights Movement. She was later an instructor in several Black Studies and Women's Studies programs such as Rutgers University, Duke University, Emory University, Atlanta University, and Spelman College.⁵ She died in 1995 after a long battle with colon cancer.

Toni Cade Bambara's Works

Bambara was one of the first writers to connect issues of Blackness and Feminism, in The Black Woman, An Anthology (1970). The book is composed of essays, stories, and poems concerning matters such as Black women's role in Black Nationalist Movements, relationships among Black men and among Black women, birth control, violence, and abortion. Her second anthology, Tales and Stories for Black Folks (1971), a tribute to the Black oral tradition, brought together stories by authors such as Alice Walker and Langston Hughes, as well as several culturally affirming versions of fables as re-told by students in Bambara's writing classes. The anthologies were followed by two collections of her short stories. Gorilla My Love (1972) features stories from the point of view of Hazel, a young, outspoken Black girl. The stories, strongly nationalist in tone, emphasize family, accountability, and community. The second collection, The Sea Birds Are Still Alive (1972), emphasizes the centrality of Black women's work in their families and communities, their role as community organizers, mentors, and the importance of building solidarity with other women. Her most famous fiction work, the novel The Salt Eaters (1980), examines the rifts between political, artistic, and spiritual workers in the Black community

⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, "Toni Cade Bambara," Black Women Writers (1950) A Critical Evaluation, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Books Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984) 12.

through the attempted suicide and subsequent healing of Velma Henry, a burnt out community worker, wife, and mother.

Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions (1999) is a compilation of many of Bambara's individually published stories and essays edited by Toni Morrison after Bambara's death in 1995 of stomach cancer. The fiction section continues to center Black women and children's experiences, community organizing, spirituality, and Black men and women's relationships. The non-fiction segment of Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions features Bambara's film criticism, including her outlook on the importance and promise of Black Independent film. Toni Morrison also edited Bambara's other posthumous work Those Bones are Not My Child (1999), which chronicles the Atlanta child murders (1978-1982). The book, written as a novel, is also steeped in investigative journalism, focusing on the racism and classism inherent in the city of Atlanta's inadequate investigation of the largely poor and Black children's abduction and murders.

Bambara's film work includes collaboration on Midnight Ramble: The Story of the Black Film Industry (1984), directed by Bestor Cramm and Pearl Bowser. Bambara served as writer and commentator in this film about Oscar Micheaux, one of the pioneers of Black film. For Louis Massiah's The Bombing of Osage Avenue (1986) Bambara wrote the screen play documenting the effects of the 1985 massacre of eleven members of the controversial Black Nationalist organization MOVE in Philadelphia. More Than Property (1993), a film that Toni Cade Bambara initiated, facilitated, and edited while at the Scribe Video Center is a documentary about the United Hands Community Land Trust, an organization in Philadelphia that helps low income people to purchase housing. In Bambara's final film project, W.E.B. DuBois, A Biography in Four Voices (1995) she served as writer and commentator for DuBois's life and activities in the 1940's.

The Black Woman Writer-Activist Tradition

Toni Cade Bambara has several Black women activist writer peers who have been consistent and deliberate in their efforts to use literature as a way of illuminating issues of oppression and resistance. Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, and Paule Marshall are some of the women whose prolific writer activism forms a dynamic dialogue with Bambara's own work. According to Patricia Hill Collins, Black women's writing is an especially potent form of resistance because many Black women receive differential treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status. As a result we face a unique matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions, being black and female in the United States, which exposes Black women to certain common experiences and can lead to a distinct consciousness about American society.⁶

Audre Lorde (1934-1992), a poet, essayist, and autobiographer, was also a native of Manhattan. Very much a contemporary of Bambara, Lorde was five years her senior. She describes herself as "a Black lesbian feminist mother lover poet." Like Bambara, for Lorde, writing was a form of expressing freedom, using it as an important vehicle for exposing injustice. Much of her writing expresses anger at racial oppression, urban, decay, and sexism. Lorde felt that her responsibility as a writer is to reveal truths, no matter how painful. She wrote: "I feel I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and to share not just my triumph, not just the things that felt good, but the pain, the intense, often intimidating pain... But I think what is really necessary is to see how much of this pain I can feel, how much of this truth I can see and still live unblended."⁷ Her essay, "Poems are not Luxuries," recognizes the relationship

⁶ Patricia Hill Collins. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. (New York: Routledge 2000) 23-24.

⁷ Black Literature Criticism: Excerpts from Criticism of the Most Significant Works of Black Authors over the Past 200 years, volume 3 Marshall-Young Ed. James P. Draper (Detroit: Gale Research Inc. 1992) 1886, 1276.

between poetry and Feminism. She writes that for women “[poetry] is a vital necessity” because it allows for emotional freedom and active contemplation of ideas in a male-dominated society. In The Black Unicorn (1978) uses African symbols to express themes of motherhood, Black pride, and spiritual renewal. Like Bambara in The Salt Eaters, she frequently alludes to Yoruba deities and African American spiritual customs as a way of affirming Black sacred traditions such as Yoruba and the Black church.

Alice Walker, born in 1944 in Georgia, like Bambara, was also active in the Civil Rights Movement. She moved to Mississippi in the 1960s to participate in the voter-registration drives with her husband, Jewish attorney Mel Leventhal. In 1970, the same year that Bambara published The Black Woman, Walker published The Third Life of Grange Copeland. The novel illuminates the effects of generational violence on, the protagonist, Ruth’s identity formation and the humanity of the men in the book, a theme she would take up later on in The Color Purple. Like Bambara’s “On the Issue of Roles” in The Black Woman, Walker brings to light the misguided notion of the Black men who reenact White patriarchy at home and abuse Black women as a form of catharsis from their own abuse by Whites in power. Like Bambara, Walker also dealt with the issue of giving voice and countering silence in her investment in unearthing Zora Neale Hurston’s works, which had fallen into obscurity. Hurston, an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance, died alone and poverty stricken in Florida. Walker wrote about placing a marker on her unmarked grave in her essay “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston” (1974). Her efforts led to the reprinting of Hurston’s major works.⁸ Meridian (1976) like The Salt Eaters (1980) deals with the post Civil Rights era. The novel follows the protagonist Meridian as

⁸ Marshall-Young Ed. James P. Draper, Black Literature Criticism: Excerpts from Criticism of the Most Significant Works of Black Authors over the Past 200 years 1886.

she struggles to forge emotional healing after her tumultuous organizing experience and personal travails as a poor, Black woman. Like Velma in The Salt Eaters, Meridian suffers mental illness as a result of a dissemblance between her political and psychological selves and it is only through facing the past and reliance on community that she is able to reach wholeness. The Color Purple (1982) also deals with issues of healing through community. After being raped by her step-father and beaten by her husband, Celie heals through reliance on her kinship with women and finding her own voice. Like Bambara, Walker also invests in the potential for change in everybody. By the end of the novel Mr. ____ is also transformed. Within In Search of Our Mother's Gardens (1982), a collection of essays, Walker coins the term “womanism,” a term to describe Black feminists. Integral to this notion of “womanism” is the nexus of oppression that many Black women inhabit, where, unlike mainstream White feminists, sexism is not their only concern: issues of classism and racism are also at play.

Sonia Sanchez, born in 1934, five years before Bambara, is her contemporary in many ways. One of the major literary voices of Black Nationalism, Sanchez like Bambara, uses Black idioms such as slang, profanity, and “the dozens.” She also saw herself as a community reporter, and wrote: “I write to tell the truth about the Black condition as I see it. Therefore I write to offer a Black woman’s view of the world. How I tell the truth is a part of the truth itself. I decided along with a number of other Black poets to tell the truth in poetry by using the language, dialect, idioms, of the folks we believed our audience to be.”⁹ Her poetry also used rhythmic styles which like Bambara’s rhetorical devices in The Salt Eaters, made use of jazz styles and improvisational forms. Like Bambara, Sanchez also stresses the importance of orality by performing her poetry widely and also in her style of writing which features

⁹ Ibid 1647.

capitalizations, divided syllables, and repeated letters that emphasize a certain rhythmic reading of her poetry. Her first two volumes of poetry, Homecoming (1969) and We a BaddDD People (1970), established the issues she would deal with in much of the rest of her writing, including some addressed by Bambara such as drug abuse, interracial relationships, politics, black man-woman relationships, racism, and the importance of strong intelligent Black role models. She was a member of the Nation of Islam from 1972-1975 because “the organization was trying to deal with concepts of nationhood, morality, small businesses, schools... And these things were very important to me.”¹⁰ This demonstrates a community-spiritual connection that was critical for Bambara also. It was during this time that she wrote A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women (1973) and several poems in Love Poems (1973) Many of these poems follow one woman’s growing political consciousness as she ages and explores her personal and social consciousness and explores her personal and social position within the Black Muslim community. Like Bambara’s own works these poems place Black women at the center and highlight their roles as mothers, sisters, lovers, wives, workers, and warriors, demonstrating a strong commitment to family and community. Unlike Bambara, Sanchez’s works reflect supporting the Black man as a theme, where Bambara takes a stance more critical of Black men. Sanchez, like Bambara uses her works to call for Black women to mentor girls because she says that society “does not prepare young black women, or women period to be women.”¹¹ This statement resembles Bambara’s “A Girl’s Story” in Gorilla My Love where a girl suffers intense trauma at starting menstruation without having been taught about it by her grandmother. I’ve Been a Woman: Selected and Poems (1978) the collection of over five years of Sanchez’s work, continues to explore issues of race, sex, and class,

¹⁰ Ibid 1648.

¹¹ Ibid 1654.

and introduces the theme of her turbulent relationship with her womanizing father. Her later works such as Under a Soprano Sky and Homegirls and Hand Grenades represent a maturing Sanchez, her themes, though still acknowledging Black men and women's relations, widen to include AIDS, Africa, and reflections on post-revolution.

Paule Marshall, born in 1929 in Brooklyn, New York is a novelist, short story writer, and essayist. She grew up in a close-knit Barbadian immigrant community, and much of her work reflects the different influences and points of view of her upbringing. Like Bambara, she centers Black women's experiences and "portrays Black women's centrality within the context of a specifically Black culture."¹² Marshall and Bambara also share a similar aspiration in privileging the individual's search for personal identity. In this vein, Marshall has been praised by critics as one of the first authors to explore the psychological traits and concerns of Black women.¹³

One of the most salient connections between Marshall and Bambara's work lies in the similarities between their most celebrated novels, Praise Song for the Widow and The Salt Eaters, respectively. Both novels center on the protagonists' breakdown and subsequent healing as it relates to larger social issues. Praise Song's Avey (Avatar) Johnson is an affluent widow in her sixties, who in her struggle to succeed has lost touch with her West Indian and Black American roots. Like Velma, the protagonist of The Salt Eaters, she has become isolated from her true self. Avey goes on a luxury cruise through the West Indies, an act which represents her materialism and alienation from her West Indian roots. She begins to have dreams of her ancestors from a South Carolina Island, where she visited as a child. She remembers the story of the Ibo's who cast off slavery. It is on this South Carolina

¹² Hans Ostrom and David Macey, The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Literature (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press 2005) 1039.

¹³ Marshall-Young Ed. James P. Draper, Black Literature Criticism: Excerpts from Criticism of the Most Significant Works of Black Authors over the Past 200 years 1363.

Island that Marshall locates the story we hear about in Bambara's "deep sight" concept, where upon landing on the American shore a group of Ibo people rejected slavery by walking home. Marshall's use of the Ibo landing story also introduces the theme of Pan-African ancestral connection through bringing together Avey's links to Africa, the Sea Islands, and Barbados.

In a moment of confusion and disorientation Avey agrees to go to an annual homecoming celebration on the tiny island of Carriacou. It is while on this island that she undergoes a spiritual rebirth, which takes place in a women's circle, through a process of "laying-on-of-hands," similar to Velma's healing communal healing process in The Salt Eaters. Avey also makes a commitment to tell others about her experience, a commitment that Bambara alludes to in her essay "Deep Sight and Rescue Missions," when she wonders if a middle aged Sister who corners the "yuppy" Blacks in her building is Avey Johnson, holding them accountable living their lives as whole, responsible individuals, per her pledge in Praise Song for the Widow.

Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, and Paule Marshall, like Bambara, place Black women's experiences at the center of their literature and from this place explored issues of race, class, and sexism. Their works, primarily directed to a Black audience, seek to encourage community while at the same time illuminating the forces that destroy it. Beyond the issues they shared with Toni Cade Bambara the other women's writings extend the conversation to other increasingly important issues, Audre Lorde brings attention to the horrible schism that homophobia wreaks amongst Blacks. Alice Walker reveals the horrible effects of violence to Black women from African American men and genital mutilation. Sonia Sanchez's work brings our attention to the horrible effects of drug abuse and the need to love and support Black men. Paule Marshall brings our gaze to Pan-African connections. The women writers

emphasize different issues, and fill in each others gaps but have largely the same goal in mind: growth, evolution, and wholeness.

Critical Readings of Bambara's work

Critical attention to Toni Cade Bambara's works has largely been limited to the novel The Salt Eaters. Philip Page's reading of Salt Eaters in Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction¹⁴ focuses on the struggle between community breakdown and wholeness. He examines Velma's attempted suicide and subsequent healing as a metaphor for both the personal and the communal. Page looks at Bambara's narrative strategies, which involve the interweaving of voices and use of multiple characters to express one story. He interprets this as a call to restore harmony through tapping into all sources of energy in order to achieve wholeness. Reconnection of the damaged self and community depends on the combined mental and spiritual efforts of everyone. He reads Bambara's vision of the future as neither utopia nor dystopia but as offering choices. However a new era will be marked by power of the mind and communal energy.

Gloria Hull's goal in "What it is I think she's doing Anyhow" A Reading of Toni Cade Bambara's The Salt Eaters"¹⁵ is primarily to clarify the novel. After years of teaching the novel to baffled students she wrote the essay in efforts to aid both students and professors in tackling a very complex text. She also maintains that unification and the Black community are the main thrusts of the novel. Hull also maintains that the Black community is Bambara's primary concern and that exploring how to overcome multiple schisms and move toward wholeness is the novel's goal. She writes that the critical questions raised in the book are, "Where are we? "Where

¹⁴ Philip Page, Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999) 125.

¹⁵ Gloria T. Hull "What it is I think she's doing Anyhow" A Reading of Toni Cade Bambara's The Salt Eaters", Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 227.

should we be heading?" "How do we get there?" "How do we get it together?" Hull maintains that the novel calls for unification. The Message is a call to bridge the gap between artists and activists, materialists and spiritualists old and young and communities. Hull reads Velma's break as the result of being solely political and logical and thus her healing can only come about when she comes into possession of her spiritual being.¹⁶ Health means taking responsibility for self and the world. Bambara presents two versions of future: one an evolved humanitarian society and the other a nightmare radioactive burial ground.¹⁷ Hull maintains Bambara's optimism however manifested in the form of Doc Serge's intense self-love and the Seven Sisters' interracial cooperation.¹⁸ Hull also points out that Bambara chose not to engage the issue of homophobia in the Black community. She illuminates the lack of same sex loving characters in The Salt Eaters and the problematic nature of a set of cross dressing men at a carnival in the story whose sexuality is not disclosed or discussed.

Derek Alwes' "The Burden of Liberty: Choice in Toni Morrison's Jazz and Toni Cade Bambara's The Salt Eaters," sees Bambara as only providing two choices in the novel: the right and wrong one, reality or delusion. Alwes claims for Bambara, right choices always involve subordinating individual freedom to the needs of the community. Personal liberty is isolating, a form of suicide.¹⁹ According to Alwes, Velma must choose to be well. It is not a choice for her not to be well, because her life is not her own, she is a member of a community, they have a say-so in the matter.²⁰ Alwes goes on to examine the community involvement, interrelations and

¹⁶ Ibid 224.

¹⁷ Ibid 274

¹⁸ Ibid 230.

¹⁹ Derek Alwes, "The Burden of Liberty: Choice in Toni Morrison's Jazz and Toni Cade Bambara's The Salt Eaters," African American Review 30.2 (1996): 3.

²⁰ Ibid 3.

synchronism within the novel. Alienation from the community brings mental and spiritual dis-ease whereas connection brings growth. Bambara's primary vehicle for social change is embodied in the Daughters of the Yam, who overcome false dichotomies between the political spiritual and the arts.²¹ According to Alwes, the goal of the novel is to discover the path to self-realization, liberty, power, and happiness. He claims that, according to Bambara, we must refuse to forget the past, participate in shared history and community, and invest in our knowledge of healing of spirit in order to achieve revolution.²²

In "Music as Theme: The Jazz Mode in the works of Toni Cade Bambara"²³ Eleanor Traylor primarily looks at The Salt Eaters according to its thematic and structural elements. Traylor describes The Salt Eaters as like a jam session: the tune is played, reviewed and restated in a new form.²⁴ This tune or main motif is the necessity for both the individual and the community to engage in its history and decipher its own rituals in order to be whole.²⁵ Like the jazz formula that Traylor engages her lyrical essay repeats its main theme, the words of Velma's healer throughout, "Can you be whole?" According to Traylor all of the characters in The Salt Eaters represent different forces in the community and the entire community is needed to defy the agents of destruction.²⁶ Traylor also acknowledges the importance of unity in the book. Traylor interprets Velma's near catatonic state as the melding the living and the dead, actual and mystical, past and present, and deities across the

²¹ Ibid 11.

²² Ibid 13.

²³ Eleanor Traylor, "Music as Theme: The Jazz Mode in the works of Toni Cade Bambara." Black Women Writers 62.

²⁴ Ibid 69.

²⁵ Ibid 60.

²⁶ Ibid 69.

boundaries of their religions.²⁷ The fluid use of time in the book signifies the need to reappraise the past, clarify where we are and predict the future in order to grow.²⁸

Elliott Butler-Davis's Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker²⁹ goes beyond The Salt Eaters to focus on the feminist consciousness in Bambara's writings more broadly; a consideration he claims to have been left out of criticism of her works. Butler-Davis writes that beneath the nationalist surface are texts of feminist consciousness. His readings of Gorilla My Love, The Seabirds are Still Alive, and The Salt Eaters examine the ways in which Bambara appropriates signs of Black Nationalist discourse to empower women. He maintains that the focus of most of her short stories is the construction and representation of organic black community and articulating Black Nationalism. The stories mostly focus on realistic depiction of neighborhoods of ordinary black working class and ignore larger global issues or intra-racial strife. Black women are the center of her narratives, Whites are on the periphery, and the role of the Black man is highly problematized. However within the short story collections her insertion of themes of desires of Black women and girls disrupts or preempts the stories' primary emphasis on classic realism and nationalism.³⁰ Butler-Davis points out that Bambara's feminine discourse manifests in the short stories through highlighting the need to: 1. establish protective bonds to pass on advice needed for survival; 2. examine and question traditional male-female relationships; 3. challenge and rebel against roles assigned to women.³¹ He points out that in the short stories men are characterized by subordination and vulnerability.

²⁷ Ibid 64.

²⁸ Ibid 67.

²⁹ Butler-Davis, Elliott, Race, Gender, and Desire, Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker (Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 1989) 91.

³⁰ Ibid 92.

³¹ Ibid 101.

There are no black male heroes. The male characters in Bambara's works are most often dependent on women or their presence is mediated by women narrators.³²

Butler-Davis's reading of The Salt Eaters also emphasizes gender conflict within the story. He insists the novel is a continuation of Bambara's earlier fiction. Butler-Evans argues in favor of reading the disunity in the novel as opposed to the unifying elements as have critics such as Hull and Page. He delves into the narrative's form and representational strategies to discover additional issues. He explores the intensification of schizophrenia as textual rewriting of the feminist discourse of the short stories. Within this reading Velma's collapse becomes a rebellion against self negation in the interest of serving nationalism. Characters such as Virginia in "The Organizer's Wife" the apprentice in "The Apprentice" in The Sea Birds are Still Alive, and Lacey in "Broken Fields Running" have ambiguous or negative reactions to the need to dismiss personal needs in service of the community.³³ He interprets Velma's suicide attempt as a calling for the legitimate expression of female desire and rebellion against gender injustice. He goes on to examine her healing through a feminist lens by examining the unification embodied in the female characters. Velma's healer Minnie Ransom is one of the only characters who actually embody multiplicities in that she is traditional healer working within a clinical setting and her relationship with the ancestors, embodying the unification of the human and spiritual world. All critics agree that unification is the main theme of the text but it is only women who actually experience this unification. Specifically, Butler-Davis points out the women's cohesive communities in mentorship relationships such as the Seven Sisters theater troop and political groups.

³² Ibid 106.

³³ Ibid 118.

Focus of the Thesis

I argue that Toni Cade Bambara's entire corpus works to meld the spiritual, artistic, and political as well as the activist and the community. This theme is contained in her essays, short stories, novels, and films, but is best demonstrated in her two novels The Salt Eaters (1980) and Those Bones are Not My Child (1999). The Salt Eaters agonizingly expresses tension between the spiritual, artistic, and political but in the novel this tension goes largely unresolved. Inability to resolve these tensions leads to the protagonist's suicide attempt and political factiousness within the Black community. Though the novel ends with the protagonist's healing, her future, as well as that of the community, is largely left open ended. Those Bones are Not My Child however resolves many of the tensions presented in The Salt Eaters. Those Bones are Not My Child narrows the boundaries between author and reader, activist and community. The novel, through its focus on actual events also collapses the divide between fiction and nonfiction, calling for the readers to incorporate the issues in the fiction into action in their lives.

Chapter One: Nonfiction and the Struggle Against Hegemony pulls several meta-themes from Toni Cade Bambara's non-fiction work: countering cultural hegemony, demanding accountability, countering false binaries, and reconstructing historical memory. It examines her essays and articles from The Black Woman and Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions. Chapter Two: Fiction and the Struggle for Wholeness, then examines these meta-themes in her fiction work. This chapter, while considering all of her fiction, closely examines The Salt Eaters and Those Bones are Not My Child. Chapter Three: Producing "Image Weapons," Serving the Community Through Documentary Film, scrutinizes several of Bambara's film projects. This chapter also uses the above mentioned meta-themes to examine the conversation between Bambara's film and fiction. The conclusion examines the growth and change

in Bambara's works over time as it reflects political changes and her own changing political consciousness and considers some of the implications of her work.

I use four meta-themes as tools to examine the trajectory of Bambara's fiction as it pursues the goal of achieving wholeness. These meta-themes are: countering cultural hegemony, accountability, resistance to false binaries, and reconstructing historical memory.

Meta-themes

I. Countering Cultural Hegemony

In this thesis I refer to Clovis Semmes's definition of hegemony where "the internal dynamics of one culture evolves in such a way that it calls into dissolution the independence, coherence, and viability of another culture. In a sense, the one culture bases its existence and well-being on the ability to absorb, redirect, or redefine institution building and symbol formation of another..... The fundamental impetus behind cultural hegemony is the historical phenomenon of European expansion and contact."³⁴ The specific aspects of resisting cultural hegemony that I will examine in Toni Cade Bambara's work involve giving voice and exposing silences, naming, claiming space, maintaining covenants, and highlighting growing consciousness in human beings. In illuminating these fundamental ways of countering hegemony she arms the Black community with the tools needed for resistance.

II. Accountability

Accountability involves being answerable to another individual or group of people or face consequences. In Bambara's works this issue plays out by exposing the ways different groups within the Black community fail to be responsible to one another, such as men to women and elders to children, and the resistance strategies of

³⁴ Clovis Semmes, Cultural Hegemony and African American Development, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992) 2.

the traditionally oppressed group. This issue is of exceptional importance in building community and a resistance movement because, in order to erect a whole, functioning, balanced society, everyone must be honored. The issue of accountability also encompasses elements such as taking collective responsibility and personal sacrifice for the greater common good. Bambara also brings to light the ways in which people in the Black community hold the Whites accountable for compromising their autonomy. This is important because it validates Black people's power to make change. Bambara also demonstrates that she is answerable to the Black community by using Black theorists and Black filmmakers to form her theoretical foundation and pays tribute to Black women filmmakers as a way of substantiating Black people's intellectual achievements and worth. Bambara brings to light film techniques that affirm Black people and uses rhetorical techniques that assert the dignity and humanity of Black peoples by portraying everyday Black people. This form of accountability makes Bambara's works responsible to Black people in both content and form.

III. Exposing False Binaries

Hegemony relies on a concept of dualism in which there is a central group and a readily identifiable other, where one group is able to define itself by not having the traits of the other group. This idea models itself on binaries such as White people being ordained, making history, speaking, being rational, autonomous, while Blacks are damned, victims, listeners, superstitious, and underdeveloped. Bambara's strategies for exposing false binaries include overcoming rifts between the political, artistic, and spiritual, the traditional and modern, and fiction and non-fiction. Several of Bambara's short stories also feature characters that resist others' urge to dichotomize different aspects of their identities. These stories counter false

dichotomies through featuring complex characters that fight against attempts to bisect their multi-faceted identities.

IV. Reconstructing Historical Memory

Reconstructing historical memory is of great importance when considering Black culture because so much of our history has been erased or misconstrued in the interest of supporting hegemony. This practice refers to the drive to piece together Black history in a manner to correct the historical record and support a holistic structuring of the Black psyche. This issue is of prime importance to Bambara and figures prominently in her film critique and fiction work. In her “deep sight” concept Bambara often uses the tale of the enslaved African people who took one look at the impending slavery on the American shore and flew all the way home, in order to illustrate this theme. The importance of this tale is that it combines a sense of history and immediate relevance, which is what Bambara put forth as the criteria for a nationalist literature.³⁵

The term “deep sight” also occurs frequently in Bambara’s non-fiction. “Deep Sight and Rescue Missions” is the name of Bambara’s essay on the risk of binary thinking amongst Black people.³⁶ The term is also significant because Toni Morrison, in posthumously publishing a collection of Bambara’s stories and essays, chose to carry over the metaphor in the title Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions. I use the term “deep sight” not in specific reference to these works but more broadly to describe the guiding framework of all of her work, which is firmly rooted in social activism. I refer here to the depth, clarity, and pertinence of her writing that never loses focus of struggle and dignity of Black people. “Deep Sight” is also a particularly relevant metaphor for referring to her work because of her turn to documentary film-

³⁵Toni Cade Bambara, “Thinking About the Play *The Great White Hope*” The Black Woman ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Penguin Books, 1970) 237.

Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations 163.

making toward the end of her life. The word “sight,” in this case, refers to film: an artistic vehicle which depends on viewing. She was committed to providing a forum for the views of the Black community from an insider, as opposed to a voyeuristic, perspective. Bambara felt that film was the medium best suited to communicate with Black people and spent most of her later years writing, editing, critiquing, and teaching the genre. Bambara is very intentional in crafting her criticism in a manner that brings issues of inequity to light as a part of a greater thrust of Black liberation. Her “deep sight” enables her to illuminate issues that are of grave importance to the survival of Black people.

This thesis makes a contribution to the field of Africana Women’s literary criticism because it concerns itself with the complete corpus of Bambara’s work. It seeks to look at Bambara as a whole, as someone who had diverse interests, talents, and grew and shifted with time. This thesis situates her work within a framework set out by Bambara herself, one that centers Black women’s voice and experiences and thus continues in the tradition she sets forth as a writer activist.

Chapter Two

Nonfiction, Forming the Foundation

The Black Woman: An Anthology (1970), Toni Cade Bambara's first publication and Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions (1999), her posthumously published collection contain most of Toni Cade Bambara's non-fiction work. Though there is considerable change in her priorities over this twenty plus years of her writing career Bambara is consistent in her commitment to resisting oppression and building community through her writing. Several meta-themes run through her non-fiction work such as: 1. countering cultural hegemony 2. pushing for accountability 3. exposing false binaries 4. reconstructing historical memory. I will discuss each of these meta-themes, which form the theoretical foundation for the thesis, in terms of the works that illustrate them best.

I. Countering Cultural Hegemony

COUNTERING CULTURAL HEGEMONY THROUGH GIVING VOICE AND EXPOSING SILENCING

Bambara's goal in The Black Woman: An Anthology was to provide a blueprint for Black women's liberation. In order to find out what that liberation meant she had to provide a space for Black women's voices because of a distinct lack of materials.³⁷ It was the first anthology of Black women's writing. Its overwhelming success proved that there was an audience for Black women's writing which until that time had been mainstream publishers' excuse for not publishing Black women's works³⁸. Until the publication of The Black Woman: An Anthology Black women had been defined primarily by other people. Psychiatrists, biologists, biochemists, and

³⁷, Toni Cade Bambara, preface, The Black Woman: An Anthology ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Penguin Books 1970) 8.

³⁸ Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations ed. Toni Morrison (New York: First Vintage contemporaries edition, 1999) 230.

historians declared that women were by nature submissive, dependent, and frivolous and that liberation for women meant the freedom to be attractive, give birth, buy new products, and have an orgasm³⁹. White feminist writers such as Anias Nin, Simone De Beauvoir, and Doris Lessing had begun to counter patriarchal images of women in literature in the European world. Bambara pre-dates the debate on Black feminism and Womanism taken up by thinkers such as Alice Walker and Clenora Hudson-Weems beginning in the 1980s by questioning if White feminist truths are relevant to Black women. She doubts that their priorities, concerns and methods are similar enough to Black women's in order to rely on White feminists as new field of experts to look at black women.⁴⁰ According to Bambara Marxism, New Left politics, and Socialism are also incompatible with Black Nationalism. She reports that there was little information on Black women at all and what was available lumped together Black men's and women's concerns.⁴¹ By the time the book was published however Daniel Patrick Moynihan had released his seminal 1965 report on the Black family, which argued that a Black matriarchy was one of the prime reasons why Black families were in crisis, and this family breakdown, in turn, has contributed to rising rates of illegitimacy, welfare dependency, school dropout, and crime.⁴² There were conceptualizations in American popular culture about Black women. This information however defined them as pathological. In The Black Woman Bambara dedicates herself to reclaiming subjectivity, by creating a space for Black women to tell their own stories and define their priorities by engaging topics of importance to them such as the role of Black women in Black Nationalist movements, birth control, abortion, racism, and education.

³⁹ Toni Cade Bambara, preface, The Black Woman 8.

⁴⁰ Ibid 9.

⁴¹ Ibid 8.

⁴² Moynihan, D. P. (1965) *The Negro family: The case for national action*. U.S. Department of Labor. from <http://www.dol.gov/asp/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>.

The focus of her essays “On the Issue of Roles” and “The Pill: Liberation or Genocide” is to re-center the Black Nationalist movement in order to value Black women’s voices and contributions. She holds Black men accountable for behavior that dehumanizes Black women, expecting this behavior will assist in regaining their manhood. Here, she is addressing sexist practices within the movements that relegated Black women to roles such as cooking, secretarial work, and motherhood regardless of their skills.⁴³ The irony is that this manhood was not destroyed by Black women, but by the same White Patriarchal system that limited both Black men and women to the status of profit making tools.

Bambara claims that the undergirding of Black men’s sexism is the capitalist system which positions men as producers and women as consumers which is then translated to men inhabiting the public realm while women are relegated to the domestic sphere. The problem therefore is not that roles such as cooking and administrative work are inherently less important. The problem lies in the values attached to them. These values have been inspired by binaries within the Western tradition that divides society into a public space (male and powerful) and a private space (female and powerless). She writes that Black men must keep their eye on the real enemy. In seeking to dominate Black women, Black men are aligning themselves with an unwitting ally in White men who had up to that point been the opposition. By dominating and fighting against the archetypal Black matriarch, they were rebelling against Black women, their natural ally.

As model for egalitarian societies Bambara turns her gaze to non-capitalist, pre-colonial societies where in some instances women inhabited such roles as rulers, politicians, soldiers, and merchants. Not only were the men unthreatened, they appreciated having their women serve as allies. European colonizers, who felt

⁴³Toni Cade Bambara, “On the Issue of Roles,” The Black Woman 102.

threatened by women's autonomy, sought to dismantle it. This system differed radically from their own, which was still based on antiquated notions of women's fragility and dependence. Here, by using non-European peoples as her model, Bambara reaffirms them as a source of knowledge and therefore questions the "universal" nature of European standard which posits itself as the standard by which all others must conform.

Therefore, Third World thinkers are forced to read the silences in order to find the truth of their own experiences. Haitian theorist Michele-Ralph Trouillot claims that power plays a tremendous role in the process of historical production. He writes that silences enter at the determination of sources, archives, narratives, and the moment of retrospective significance. These silences reflect uneven power in their production and collection.⁴⁴ This process of silencing disempowers a formerly powerful group that is seen as representing a threat in the new social order. As a cultural critic Bambara often reads the narrative through the silences. Her readings are able to bring to light European hegemony by illuminating the deletion of Black people's realities which then calls into question the universality of many European claims. An emphasis on silences also enables a revolutionary reading by looking at whose story is missing and how a power imbalance was the determining factor in creating these lapses.

Bambara's writing on the Atlanta child murders (1978-1982) focuses on the issues of silence and accountability. She focuses on the struggle between the dominant and oppressed narratives in the story. The article "What's happening in Atlanta" forms the documentation basis for her book manuscript These Bones are Not My Child. Both speak to the effort of Black parents to gain justice in the face of

⁴⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston, MA Beacon Press, 1995)

atrocities committed in their communities. Between the 1979 and 1982 dozens Black children were murdered in Atlanta. The official number was twenty-six cases, though the community estimates the death toll at twice that number and included numbers (namely Black women) not included in the official number because they did not fit the media's seemingly arbitrary pattern. The city sought to quiet the publicity on these murders. Serial murders would also cause the city embarrassment, making them appear inept to the public, because they were not able to catch the killer over a long stretch of time. City officials also vehemently denied that the murders were racially motivated. Fed up with police attempts to shut them up and discredit them, the children's parents and community members protested by forming the group STOP (Committee to Stop Children's Murders). The group's goal was to pressure the city to organize a commission to deal with the cases as a string of related murders. The city responded by forming the Metropolitan Atlanta Emergency Task Force to Investigate Missing and Murdered Children. The Task Force, however, was staffed by unqualified people who ignored or downplayed significant evidence. The F.B.I. proceeded to implicate the parents as the number one suspects in the murder, which the parents followed with an Anti-defamation suit. Not satisfied with the task force's efforts, the parents and community members organized huge neighborhood watches and civilian search teams. In February of 1982 this task force was disbanded when Wayne Williams, a Black man, was arrested on circumstantial evidence, though there were several more murders after his arrest. Bambara finds significant evidence, to link the killings with ritualistic or hate group inspired killings which were largely ignored by police.⁴⁵

In her essay "School Daze," Bambara's critique of Spike Lee's film of the same title reads Lee's silences to illuminate issues of social justice. In her view Lee

⁴⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, "What's Happening in Atlanta," Race and Class 24:.2 (1982): 112-124.

missed several opportunities to make the film truly a tool for social justice because of his misogynistic and homophobic sensibility. One of the opening scenes of the film portrays color-caste conflict using hair as a metaphor. In the musical number “Good and Bad Hair” the two opposing groups of women, the Naturals, represented by brown-skinned sisters with natural hair styles and the Rays, light-skinned sorority sisters with colored contact lenses and hair weaves, compete by exchanging insults such as “jigaboos” and “wannabes”. The women, however, never enter into dialogue about the reasons or costs of this racist practice. Bambara identifies two different spaces in the movie where the women could have engaged the subject. Instead Da Naturals discuss how men are “dogs” and the Rays plan a party for the frat brothers. Here, Bambara demonstrates how Lee denies the women the opportunity to express a critical consciousness concerning their beliefs. Instead they spend their time supporting the myth that all Black men are dogs and that Black women are merely Black men’s help mates.

“Da fellas” and the men of Gamma Phi Gamma (G Phi G) represent the opposing groups of Black men. “Da fellas,” led by the character Dap, are loosely politicized, brown skinned, easy going, working class men. G Phi G, led by Julian/Big Brother Almighty, on the other hand, are athletic, light skinned, sexist, upper class, and brutish. The two opposing male groups clash when “Da fellas” retaliate against a frat’s interruption of their South African divestment political rally by crashing the frat’s step show. “Da Fellas” interrupt with their own step and chant, but instead of one that brings to light divestment from South Africa, the supposed source of their feud with the frat, their chant focuses on abusing the frat members’ manhood by accusing them of being gay. They chant, “When I say Gamma, you say fag” and later on they aggrandize their own manhood by chanting “daddy long

stroke.”⁴⁶ Here, according to Bambara, Dap misses the opportunity to counter the insult to his political message by reaffirming the message. By engaging the frat brothers in a battle of manhood, it shifts the terms of the debate to who has the biggest phallus. In a second missed opportunity Bambara points out the seduction/corruption of Half-Pint, the skinny, dorky, frat pledge (played by Spike Lee). The G Phi Gs tell Half-Pint that he cannot be a real man if he is a virgin. Julian/ Big Brother Almighty offers him the sexual services of his girl friend Jane (whom he had tired of and now seeks an excuse to drop). Meanwhile the rest of the frat brothers eagerly listen outside the door in a scene Bambara claims suggests a gang bang or group rape. Lee paints Jane’s rape as the result of her ambition and her voluntary sacrifice. As a result of her desire to climb the social ranks of the sorority and having told Julian that “she was just doing what he told her to do” this situation lends itself to a reading that she was asking to be debased.

Bambara dismisses Lee’s attempt at making a political statement out of Jane’s rape. She traces Lee’s misogyny through his other films that showcase pornography and sexual harassment. In this scene Lee’s intended meaning (protest) fails to mask the constructed meaning (punishment)⁴⁷. Lee also misses an opportunity, according to Bambara, to point out problems in the construction of masculinity in the Black community by not illuminating the homo-eroticism-homophobia nexus in the gang rape type of surveillance that the frat brothers engage in while listening at the door to Half-Pint and Jane have sex. Bambara points out that Dap, the Black Nationalist character in the film, misses three opportunities to develop political clarity. The first time is with his girlfriend Rachel when she accuses him of only dating her because she is one of the darkest sisters on campus and it would benefit his image as an

⁴⁶ Toni Cade Bambara, “School Daze,” Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations) 186.

⁴⁷ Ibid 192.

Afrocentric man. The second opportunity comes when his friends suggest that one of the reasons they won't back his divestment campaign is because of his abrasive personality. The third time is with the locals when in an altercation they try to generalize all of the college students and dismiss the significance of the difference between the Greeks and the campus revolutionaries as relevant to their own lives when these differences reflect the class and political tensions within most Black communities.⁴⁸

I would add a fourth occasion for missed political clarity when Dap fails to point out to Half-Pint that his masculinity is not dependent on his having had sex. Dap's failure is important because he represents the most political and clear thinking character in the film. Like a griot Lee presents Dap as knowing more than other characters. This is played out in the last scene in the film where in the early dawn he yells at us all to wake up. He demands the characters as well as the audience (who may also inhabit stratified positions in the Black community), become cognizant of the ways in which these rifts in the community prohibit growth and action. The homophobic and sexist gaps in Dap's analysis provide an opening for not only examining Spike Lee's failures but as a way of bringing the issues to light.

Bambara continues her explorations of silences as political statements in her critique of the play The Great White Hope, directed by Martin Ritt. Bambara points out the limitations of the one-sided portrayal of the main Black female character. Clara is the stereotypical harping Black matriarchal bitch and victim. Bambara points out that what is important about this character is the potential for liberation from the synthetic and superficial Clara type.⁴⁹ She suggests that if men would take the time to understand the reasons, history, and narrative of the "evil Black bitch," this archetype

⁴⁸ Ibid 198.

⁴⁹ Toni Cade Bambara, "Thinking About the Play *The Great White Hope*" The Black Woman ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Penguin Books, 1970) 241.

would stop reoccurring. Thus through her criticism of the lack of valid characterization of Black women Bambara is able to pose the possibility of liberation through greater understanding. She thus shifts the blame of the externally defined, stereotypical images off of the victim, in this case Black women, and onto the victimizer, whose lack of understanding prompts his repeated regurgitation of these images.

LANGUAGE

The issue of voice and silence is also played out in the question of language which led many Independent filmmakers to enter cinema.⁵⁰ This theme is of extreme importance to Bambara, who consistently writes in Black English, and when this aspect of work brought praise, she dismissed it, saying “I write how people speak”⁵¹ Here Bambara claims the right to write in the language that Black people speak despite cultural hegemonic discourse which demands that everyone speak “standard” English. She points out that this is an issue that led many independent filmmakers to make movies. They explore the politics of growing up speaking another language that was not respected in American mainstream. Many bi-lingual children are only taught English in many schools out of fear that another language will taint their English skills, that other languages are pidgins or not entire languages, or that a child must know Standard English in order to be able to complete tasks like apply for a job. Bambara also points out the nimble use of the Gullah language in the film “Daughters of the Dust” by Julie Dash as a political statement affirming Africanized English as a valid form of African American culture.

⁵⁰ Ibid 142.

⁵¹ Ibid 215.

II. Accountability

Accountability is also one of Bambara's priorities as an activist writer. She points out how community liability, intimately related to self-criticism and addressing internal contradictions, is needed in order to sustain revolution. This concern is reflected in all of her work and is one of the central themes in her books Black Woman and Those Bones Are Not My Child. Her essay in the Black Woman "On the Issue of Roles" emphasizes gender imbalance in the Black Nationalist movement. Bambara demands that Black men be accountable to black women by limiting their roles.⁵² She continued this theme in her essay "The Pill: Revolution or Genocide." She claimed that Brothers who demanded, as a way of aiding the revolution, that Sisters not use birth control are irresponsible and sexist. It does a disservice to Sisters by telling them to fight with wombs, not minds. She held the Brothers responsible for prioritizing their egos over women and children's health. She demanded that Brothers deal with poverty first before limiting women's liberty with children they may not be able to support. She asked why aren't Brothers talking about communes, day-care centers, and pregnancy stipends?⁵³ Bambara's experience as a delegate to Cuba in 1973, and Vietnam in 1975, both communist countries, speaks of an interest in revolution as expressed through alternative economics, communal networks.

The issue of accountability to the community is also the first concern of the UCLA film school revolt. Bambara points out that while this goal is paramount to Black independent filmmakers, Hollywood films are only in search of money and entertainment. Therefore these mainstream directors try to position themselves to a range of spectators as opposed to an authenticating audience or the community. Bambara claims that while Spike Lee's films exhibit many of the film techniques

⁵² Toni Cade Bambara, "On the Issue of Roles," The Black Woman Ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Penguin Books, 1970) 102.

⁵³ Ibid 168.

practices used by the Independent Film Movement, they fail to be truly accountable to the Black community because of his attempts to appeal to several types of spectators.⁵⁴ She examines specifically the way in which School Daze attempts to be acceptable to both heterosexists and progressives but fails to be truly a work of social justice. Bambara holds that Lee's perpetuation of sexism and homophobia in the film denies voice to large segments of the Black population.

Bambara affirms a sense of accountability in her cultural criticism by using revolutionary theorists and filmmakers of color as her philosophical base and by paying tribute to Black independent filmmakers. Bambara most often uses Frantz Fanon as her theoretical foundation. Her essay "On the Issue of Roles" in The Black Woman addresses gender in nationalist organizations, cites Frantz Fanon's A Dying Colonialism, which looks at the impact of the Algerian liberation struggle on changing traditional relationships. She also cites Fanon in her discussions on voicing and silence "To speak is to assume a culture and to bear responsibility for a civilization."⁵⁵ This issue of voice and silence frames much of her commentary on film. She goes on to cite Paulo Freire as the inspiration for her activist pedagogy and engaged cultural work: "The purpose of educational forms is to reflect and encourage the practice of freedom."⁵⁶ This is the lens through which she views the impetus of socially relevant film and her own writing. Through choosing these people of color as her models she affirms their knowledge and places them at the center of the discourse.

Bambara uses independent Black films and filmmakers as her source of inspiration and her theoretical foundation. In her critique of School Daze Bambara cites several Black filmmakers who have done a better job than Spike Lee in dealing with alien standards of beauty such as Ayoka Chenzira and Julie Dash, and Zeinabu

⁵⁴ Ibid 187.

⁵⁵ Ibid 250.

⁵⁶ Ibid 193.

Davis.⁵⁷ She also sets the theoretical foundation for Spike Lee's attempt to regain Half-Pint's manhood through rape with a film by Asian filmmaker Art Nomura. Nomura's film depicts the way in which Asian men, largely marginalized and stereotyped as feminine, try to gain American status through assuming patriarchal roles.⁵⁸

Bambara also points out that Black independent filmmakers maintain accountability to the Black community through their filmmaking techniques. Bambara claims one of the negative consequences of the prevalence of mainstream filming techniques is that it encourages certain types of depictions. Independent filmmakers must therefore invest in alternative editing and narrative practices in order to honor Third World people's history and imperatives. She looks specifically at Black independent films such as Sembene Ousmane's work, which uses long shots which emphasize wide ranges of space as a means of calling attention to home, community, and cultural continuity and brings to light the colonial experience where the appropriation of space by others is important. She juxtaposes this emphasis on space with Hollywood techniques which hide space and instead primarily use tight shots which emphasize individual psychological drama.⁵⁹

Bambara indicates that one of the difficulties Black independent filmmakers face is breaking through the cultural barrier that separates independent films from Black audiences. Many movie theaters in Black neighborhoods only feature action and romances movies. Bambara writes that as a result of the limited choices in films many Black people's creative imaginations have been colonized. She claims that many Black people have been conditioned to like the quick fixes, adrenaline rushes, and serotonin boosts from popular films.

⁵⁷ Ibid 191.

⁵⁸ Ibid 192.

⁵⁹ Ibid 144.

Bambara pays tribute to Black independent film mentors, directors, and other artists in "Reading the Signs Empowering the Eye," in Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions. Like a griot, one of the traditions of her namesake, the Bambara people, she lists her ancestors in film and performs the concept of "nommo" or giving power by naming. Through this act, she actively counters the silencing that has meant that many Black independent filmmakers have been unable to find funding, audience or producers through the dominant industry⁶⁰.

Bambara also used people of color as the source of information in "Deep Sight and Rescue Missions," an article wrote about assimilation. Bambara began her study by recruiting an Asian grocer to discuss assimilation with her largely international customers then report her findings. The content of the essay is her conversations with people on the street about the subject from the young graffiti artist whizzing by on a skateboard to the people gathered around the produce truck.⁶¹ Her use of everyday Black people's opinions to inform her scholarship places their concerns at the center of the discourse not as research subjects but as autonomous, free thinking, individuals whose ideas are valued. Centering Black people's perspectives reaffirms Bambara's sense of accountability to the Black community. As a writer-activist she is a servant of the community whose job it is to reflect the issues of the people in order to bring about social justice.

III. Exposing False Binaries

Binaries involve dividing people and experiences into two groups in which each group exhibits polar opposite traits. According to a binary view Whites and Blacks are completely opposite, with Whites having traits such as purity, knowledge, and religion. On the opposite side of the binary construction are Blacks, who with

⁶⁰ Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations Toni Morrison ed. (New York: First Vintage contemporaries edition, 1999) 128.

⁶¹ Ibid 153.

their lasciviousness, ignorant, and superstitious tendencies need civilizing by Europeans. Bambara constructs a fictional family portrait to illustrate her own journey out of binary thinking. At a loss for words within the confines of non-fiction she turns to the short story form to discuss this issue.⁶² In the essay, “Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions,” the protagonist is a child of a politicized Black family grows up hearing her family polarize popular issues of the time such as assimilation versus nationalism, repatriation versus self-determination, and swing vote politics versus independent political party formations. She, however, has begun conceptualize her identity in binary terms. The protagonist begins to see herself through the eyes of White America, aided largely through her addiction to Hollywood films. As a result of her acceptance of White cultural norms she is at risk of becoming culturally and politically lost. She comes to clarity concerning race relations with the support of her community who hold her accountable to an understanding of the reality of racially based power imbalance. She finally goes on to become a community organizer but notes the dangers of false binaries in the non-profit sector involving pitting men against women, older against younger members, staff against community members, and independent sources of funding versus government and corporate ones.

IV. Reconstructing Historical Memory

In Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions Bambara’s critique of Julie Dash’s Daughters of the Dust centers on the theme of reconstructing historical memory. This theme involves re-presenting history in a way that reinserts African people’s complete story; one that may involve resistance, wholeness, and dignity, values which threaten European cultural hegemony. Bambara begins with the opening scene of the film where a Black woman is at the helm of the boat that cuts through the river leading to the Sea Islands where the Peazant family lives. Bambara points out that the image of

⁶² Toni Cade Bambara, “Deep Sight and Rescue Missions,” Deep Sight and Rescue Missions 164.

the proud Black woman at the helm of the boat is reappropriating the theme of the White woman missionary at the helm of a ship going to colonize African peoples. The Peasant family is instead self-determining. Through African cultural retentions the Peasants validate themselves and build a liberated zone within their family and community in an otherwise hostile racial environment. The dual narrative structure of the film intertwines the voices of the grandmother and unborn daughter. This framework connotes a cycle of life. Its form is similar to African storytelling techniques, using call and response to handing down information thus placing it as a part of African cultural continuum. On the eve of her family's departure from the Sea Islands, Nana Peasant, the head of the household and cultural bearer of the family, beseeches her children to remember their history and roots which will sustain them in the hostile world. Nana Peasant then places her amulet, a loc of her mother's hair on top of the Bible and has each family member kiss it before they board the boat to leave. Bambara emphasizes this scene in order to indicate that it was cultural memory that was to keep the family together and that in the Africanized culture of the Sea Islanders it was the African element, the relic from the ancestor that was given precedence over the bible. Though there was a syncretism between the two cultures, with the African element taking priority over the European one to ensure cultural continuity of the family. Reconstructing the Black past reveals a history of struggle and enables us to build current movements and find strength and the source for cultural renewal.

For Bambara salvation was also the core issue of her work. She posed solutions to the substantial issues facing Black people. To combat the undeclared war between Black men and women she posed in The Black Woman that all Blacks shift priorities. That instead of gender we prioritize the Struggle. She claimed that

definitions of man/womanhood should come out of a commitment to Blackhood.⁶³ She also suggested that we look to the past and reclaim old relationships; forms used in non-capitalist pre-colonial societies in which women were rulers, warriors, and traders and men were not threatened but happy to have strong allies. Bambara wrote in an essay in Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation that the immunity to the serpent's sting lies in Black people's tradition of struggle and our ability to synthesize, or to combine the different parts of our heritage in order to survive⁶⁴. It was also necessary to know our real enemies, which are neither the opposite sex nor other races. Like Du Bois she proposes alliances and Diaspora connections. She proposes in her introduction to This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color that women of color form political and cultural alliances as she recommends in her novel Salt Eaters in the form of a radical women of color theater troupe, the Seven Sisters.⁶⁵ Continuing in this vein of cross-cultural communications she recommends that Third World Filmmakers experiment with what it would look like to use other cultural groups as their authenticating audience. What would a film look like where Chicano/Chicana community directed their work with Native Americans in mind? She predicts that the outcome would be the end of victim portraiture, false dichotomies, and a reconceptualization of the power configuration in America.⁶⁶

Chapter three, Fiction and the Struggle for Wholeness, studies the main themes of the thesis, countering cultural hegemony, demanding accountability, countering false dichotomies, and Reconstructing historical memory, as these themes play out in

⁶³ Ibid 105.

⁶⁴ Toni Cade Bambara, "Salvation is the Issue" Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation 47.

⁶⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, foreword, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (New York, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981) viii.

⁶⁶ Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations 178.

Bambara's fiction work. Through rooting these themes, it is possible to follow the trajectory of Bambara's works as they work to reinforce the idea of personal and community wholeness.

Chapter Three

Fiction and the Struggle for Wholeness

Chapter two analyzed the four themes that I have identified in Toni Cade Bambara's nonfiction works: countering cultural hegemony, illuminating false dichotomies, establishing accountability, and reconstructing historical memory. These themes surface in Bambara's fiction as it negotiates the internal rifts among activists, spiritualists, and artists, as well as the external rift between writer and reader. Each piece of her writing contributes a different piece of a whole picture. For Bambara this whole is multi-generational, political, spiritual, artistic, and involving community activism and accountability. This message reaches its maturity in her seminal work Those Bones Are Not My Child which involves a compelling combination of all of these issues. This melding is best demonstrated in tracing the trajectory between her two full length novels The Salt Eaters and Those Bones are Not My Child. While The Salt Eaters is invested in revealing multiple rifts in the Black community, Those Bones Are Not My Child resolves these tensions by blurring the line between reader and writer, activist and community member, and fictional and documentary narrative. The result of collapsing these boundaries is a call to action that implicates the reader as a mechanism for change.

I. Countering Cultural Hegemony

COUNTERING CULTURAL HEGEMONY THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF NAMING

Naming has always been a powerful aspect of countering cultural hegemony for Black people. White people's perception of Blacks is manifested in both the names they call us and the power they reserve to name us. Black people have

attempted to claim our power as a people by claiming the power to name ourselves. We have moved from Nigger, to Colored, to Negro, to Black, to Afro-American, to African-American, and for some back to Nigger again. This evolution in naming is reflective of an attempt to encompass more than just what we call ourselves but to capture greater autonomy by wresting the power to name ourselves from Whites. The importance of naming is also reflected in debates within the Black Women's Movement over the usage of names such as Womanist, Black feminist, and Africana Womanist to encompass our unique identity and to articulate the differences in our identity and struggles from Black men and White women. The issue of naming is also present in Toni Cade Bambara's work. Bambara's naming practices reflect tradition, kinship networks, respect of elders, and commentary on the roles of Black Nationalism.

Many of Toni Cade Bambara's main characters have nicknames, a common practice in Black communities. Gorilla My Love has two protagonists named Sugar, The Sea Birds are Still Alive and Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions have main characters named Honey, and protagonists in The Sea Birds are Still Alive is named Candy. Sweet names notwithstanding these characters are strong willed and self-defining. Bambara's naming practice eschews a feminist reading that would consider her use of these feminine nicknames as diminutizing. These nicknames instead emphasize the women's relationship with the community. The names give power to the community ties that coheres and endear the women to other members of their kinship networks.

In Bambara's novels naming also communicates respect for elders and tradition especially for women. Elder women are most often referred to with a title that includes some form of the word "mother". There are several Ma Dears and M'Dears in the stories. Mama Drew runs the house in "The Johnson Girls" and Mama

Drear is Candy's grandmother in "Christmas Even at Johnson's Drugs N Goods." The use of the title "mother" emphasizes the kinship ties between community members in the story, especially the power of women who hold these networks together. Many of the middle aged women's names are prefaced with Miss as a way of showing respect such as Miss Moore in "The Lesson" and Miss Ruby in "Playing with Punjab." Some male characters are also known by their position in the family such as Baby Jason in "Gorilla My Love" and Sonny in Those Bones are Not My Child and "Talking Bout Sonny." The protagonist in "The Basement" refers to the women characters by their relationship to her and her friend Patsy, they are "mama," "Patsy['s] mother", and "Patsy['s] aunt." These naming practices emphasize both the individual and the relationship that the person has within the community or greater kinship network.

Bambara's treatment of African renaming practices during the Black Nationalist Movement is two-fold. First of all, she highlights the way in which renaming serves to accentuate these characters' commitment to empowerment and community. Secondly, Bambara uses re-naming to satirize a superficial investment or understanding of Black Nationalism. As an act of sincere and self-reflective re-naming, Bambara, took an African last name after seeing the word Bambara etched on an old family journal.⁶⁷ This renaming emphasizes reclaiming an African past. Characters such as Dada Bibi and Dada Lacey are important mentors in the community. They are staunch advocates for children and educators for liberation. The term Dada is a Kiswahili word for sister and term of respect for a woman and Bibi is a Kiswahili word meaning "lady" or "grandmother."⁶⁸ This terminology reflects a nationalist turn toward African naming practices as a way of reclaiming African ancestry as a source of cultural pride and resistance. Characters such as Obie in The

⁶⁷ Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions, Ed Toni Morrison, (New York: First Vintage contemporaries edition, 1999) 237.

⁶⁸ Julia Stewart, African Names, (New York; Citadel Press, 1993) 114.

Salt Eaters and Aicha in “A Tender Man” also have chosen African names. Obie, an Igbo word meaning Love, was originally James Henry; his choice in name is important because it underlines his commitment to the Black community represented in his dedication to the Community Center. Aicha is a Swahili or Arabic name which means “woman” or “life.” Aicha’s choice of an African name underlines her dedication and seriousness as she requests custody of Cliff’s daughter. On the other hand Cliff’s abbreviated European name captures the childishness in his negligent shouldering of his duties as a father though he professes to be a nationalist as a liberal Sociology professor.

Candy’s Nationalist co-worker, Obatale,⁶⁹ in “Christmas Eve at Johnson’s Drug N Goods” is known throughout the story as Ali Baba by Candy, who cannot pronounce his name but stealthily notes the books he is reading and gets them from the library because she admires his political commentary. When he invites her to a Kwanzaa celebration she is apprehensive, because she doesn’t completely understand it. Her decision to attend the event marks a turning point for her in the novel both personally and politically. Personally she decides to take her fate into her own hands and pursue her dreams despite her parents’ neglect and politically she turns toward nationalism, which is marked by her decision to go to the Kwanza celebration and to stop making fun of Obatale’s name. She confronts him, asking him to say it slowly and write it down so she can understand it.⁷⁰

In Bambara’s fiction African renaming practices can also satirize or serve as commentary on misdeeds of Black Nationalists. Ms. Hazel’s daughter Nisi in “My Man Bovanne” renamed herself Tamu. It is her job to introduce her mother to a crowd of Nationalists whom she expects to organize a council of elders. Tamu and her

⁶⁹ Obatale possibly is a variation of Obatala the Yoruba deity of knowledge.

⁷⁰ Toni Cade Bambara, The Sea Birds are Still Alive, (New York: Vintage Book Division of Random House, 1982) 208.

siblings, however, did not ask their mother if she wanted the job and furthermore did not inform her mother of her name change. When Tamu informs her mother that she expects her to go on stage and announce the new project, Miss Hazel resists both the imposition of the role and her daughter's name change. "Me? Didn nobody ask me nuthin. Tamu? You mean Nisi? She change her name?"⁷¹ Tamu's name change criticizes an aspect of nationalism that is concerned with the superficial or the outward but misses valuable truths such as truly valuing elders.

COUNTERING HEGEMONY THROUGH EMPOWERING POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Political consciousness is an important front in the battle against cultural hegemony, because, for many Blacks, a revolutionary consciousness has been a shelter from European domination and for many more, political consciousness has been their only viable form of resistance to oppression. Through spreading misinformation Black people have been led to believe they have no viable history and culture and are beholden to Europeans for civilization, which in turn feeds European world domination and disables the personal and political autonomy of people of color. When this misinformation is internalized by people of color it can transform them into allies in their own oppression. A political consciousness is therefore the first battle site in revolution because without a politicized consciousness it is impossible to fight for self-determination.

Revolutionaries must counter propaganda campaigns aimed at oppressing people waged by powerful governments who have more resources. In the story "The Sea Birds Are Still Alive" the government newspaper is its primary means of spreading propaganda. The paper lies, in attempts to minimize the revolution and spread its ideals. An old woman spits "beetle juice" on the paper in disgust as a form

⁷¹ Ibid 6.

of silent resistance. Countering propaganda through consciousness building is an important issue, as it forms the foundation for a revolutionary writer. Literature as a part of revolution operates as a tool to raise consciousness. In the story, the sea birds are still alive because of the potential in everyone to transform and become an agent for change.

The short story “The Sea Bird Are Still Alive,” takes place on a boat in a militarized South East Asian country, presumably Vietnam. The back drop of the story is conversations concerning rebel forces, student resistance, informants, attacks, government retaliation, and greedy landlords. The main character is a revolutionary who aids largely through sharing traditional knowledge and contributing labor. She tells the young soldiers of the old ways of capturing enemies at sea by placing poles in the sea floor that will entangle foreign ships. She cooks for the freedom fighters, carries arms, boils the herbal concoction for their poison arrows, sharpens arrow heads and fills quivers, and prays for their victory.⁷² Her contribution reinforces traditional knowledge, and opposes cultural alienation and assimilation as preached by Western Imperialism. She is later captured. Although government soldiers torture her for information about revolutionary activities, she does not betray her comrades. When she is released from prison, one of the guards gives her a loaf of bread. She assumes it is poisonous and gives the bread to her daughter to throw at seagulls. The seagulls however do not die. They instead turn vicious when the child stops feeding them and begin to attack the girl. The birds’ uprising underscores unequal distribution of wealth which can prompt rebellion and greedy government officials who spend public funds on extravagance on themselves while the poor fight for scraps. The soldier, though a tool of the government, demonstrated compassion and perhaps a latent sympathy for the revolutionary cause by giving the woman nourishment.

⁷² Ibid 83.

The theme that all people are redeemable resurfaces when the boat docks. The little boy who helps the woman and her daughter carry their luggage is a spy for the government. He reports suspicious behavior for money to buy food. He has no ill will and in fact may not have any idea of the consequences of what he is doing. He really wants to be a part of a family, he thinks, as he walks in between old woman and girl carrying their bags.⁷³ The old woman is worried about the boy because he is sickly. She knows he is a spy but she believes he has a future.⁷⁴ She is interested in investing in the boy despite his misdeeds because of his human potential. She is not interested in using him or giving him scraps like the government he reports to. She is instead interested in teaching him skills that will both help him to develop his capabilities and to help his people. The woman reports that the elders of the struggle taught her that everyone matters. Revolution gives people the chance to change.

The importance of awakening political consciousness is repeated in the story “The Long Night,” also in The Sea birds are Still Alive. The violence of the police is the jolt needed to catalyze people’s awareness. The story begins with the forced entry of the police into a revolutionary’s home as she hides in the bathtub. She is terrified, because she thinks they seek to arrest her for her political group’s militant activities. In the past the armed group has assaulted a pesticide plant, a police precinct, and has made a botched attempt to free student political prisoners. The woman in the apartment is terrified and near panic. She imagines her torture and plots her escape, mentally taking stock of the guns she has hidden throughout her home. The actual motive of the police break in is to procure a mop and bucket to clean up the blood from a botched murder they have committed. The police bang on several doors, scaring and intruding on many of the community members. The police are likened to

⁷³ Ibid 93.

⁷⁴ Ibid 92.

burglars: One woman pleads as they bang on her door, “Please [go don’t hurt us] we have kids in here.”⁷⁵ After the police leave the scene of their crime, the people descend to look at the pool of blood on the sidewalk that the organizer’s mop could not sop up. Witnessing this evidence of crime against their community, the people begin to emerge into clarity.

The people would be emerging from the dark of their places. Surfacing for the first time in eons into clarity... And their brains, true to their tropism....would stretch the whole body up to the light, generating new food.. And they would look at each other for the first time and wonder, who is this one and that one. And she would join the circle gathered round the ancient stains in the street. And someone would whisper, and who are you. And who are you. And who are we. And they would tell each other in a language that had evolved, not by magic, in the caves.⁷⁶

The violence jolts the people out of their apathy. The episode leads them to bond together, to take responsibility for one another and their community. This new found responsibility is symbolized in their acquainting themselves with each other, countering the anonymity that can come with living in large cities. This anonymity can lead to minimizing a wrong done to someone else because it does not directly affect them. This individuality is classified as darkness in the story and growing consciousness and collectivity is moving toward light. This emerging consciousness involves becoming each other’s keepers.

Bambara explores the theme of emerging consciousness on an individual basis in “The Organizer’s Wife,” from The Sea Birds are Still Alive. The main character, through a different process, emerges from her self-centered perspective toward one of

⁷⁵ Ibid 100.

⁷⁶ Ibid 102.

greater personal power and community accountability. In “The Organizer’s Wife,” Virginia is transformed as a result of her participation in a community organization. The story is called “The Organizer’s Wife” because in the beginning Virginia very much just wishes to be the wife of Graham, the lead organizer. However her decisive action and transformation place her at the center of the story. The title “The Organizer’s Wife” then becomes ironic because it both questions and captures the practice of referring to women by their husband’s name (such as Mrs. John Smith).⁷⁷ The title reappropriates this misnaming by placing Virginia as the subject of the story and highlights her change. Virginia is called “Gin” by the community members. This diminutizing nickname captures her place as a minor in the story and sets the stage for her empowerment later on. Gin is an undereducated local girl who seeks above all to flee her stagnant home town. She marries the local organizer, Graham, who is attempting to lead the rural community in a land rights campaign. The local farmers have been manipulated and intimidated into underselling their land to developers. Though Graham is invested in the campaign it is Virginia’s hope that he will soon leave the community, taking her with him. Graham runs a community school on land leased to the organization by the local church. Virginia takes a literacy class at the Freedom School but, having learned quickly, she begins to help teach. The church sells the land that the community organization occupied and hoped to later buy with the pastor having helped to trump up the charges that lead to Graham’s imprisonment. The local farmers, who had thus far been dependent on Graham to organize them, use their local connections to arrange to have the paperwork held up to sell the land.

At the climax of the story Virginia, hearing of the preacher’s treachery, confronts him at the church and beats him with a ruler until he scampers away.

⁷⁷ Such as Coretta Scott King who was known in the South as “The Widow” throughout her life and despite her own activities as a civil rights leader.

Virginia's use of a ruler to reprimand the preacher is symbolic of the important role of education as a tool of liberation. It also speaks to a fundamental shifting of roles. Virginia takes the role of the teacher by wielding the ruler. She refuses to bow to the pastor's traditional role as community leader. This church is symbolic of many such establishments which misuse their moral authority by siding with those who do not have the community's best interests in mind in order to gain respectability with Whites. This confrontation is a pivotal point for Virginia, who thus far only wanted to leave the town and its problems. She begins to see the community's problems as her own and take responsibility for them as opposed to simply wanting to flee them for a utopian big city. She is transformed in the story. She becomes strong. She usually goes to the jail to visit Graham sobbing uncontrollably but this time she goes composed and in control to present bail money.⁷⁸ Virginia's journey is from a naive country girl to a community organizer. This shift is more a rite of passage for Gin than motherhood, which only bears a passing reference in the novel. This metamorphosis involves her change from a victim into a leader who submerges her own wants to the needs of the community.

The importance of emerging personal and communal consciousness is also one of the central themes of The Salt Eaters. The novel was published in 1980, at the end of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and at the beginning of the Black Women's Movement. It begins with the attempted suicide of Velma Henry, one of the most dedicated activists of fictional town of Claybourne. In many ways the novel reflects the Black community's intense despair, exhaustion, and division in the wake of the loss of its major leaders and the denouement of these major movements. Velma's suicide attempt is largely the result of being overworked and overwhelmed

⁷⁸ Toni Cade Bambara, The Sea Birds are Still Alive 17.

by the problems facing the Black community as well as her inability to access her own spiritual resources which she has neglected while engaged in political work. The novel then takes us on a journey back and forth in time, through several dimensions, and characters in order to resolve the multiple schisms that face both Velma and the Black community. Bambara writes that in The Salt Eaters she was trying to figure out how to breach the gap between the spiritual, psychic, and political forces in community. The Salt Eaters grew out of an attempt to fuse this “wasteful and dangerous split,” and to envision the incredible power and possibility if a bridge was made.⁷⁹ The title The Salt Eaters has multiple references in the novel and refers to the main themes; the key to Black people’s survival lies in community, struggle and unification.

II. Demanding Accountability

Many of Bambara’s stories emphasize meeting responsibility for obligations and the consequences for failing to do so. The process of redressing the consequences for not upholding these responsibilities emphasizes interrelation between people and reinforces Bambara’s theme of community wholeness.

DEMANDING GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH HIGHLIGHTING BROKEN COVENANTS

One of the ways that Toni Cade Bambara’s books explore the theme of demanding accountability is through highlighting broken covenants, or the unspoken agreements between family and community members.⁸⁰ In Bambara’s short stories people lie, molest children, little girls don’t respect one another, young nationalists don’t value their elders, and men disrespect and abandon their partners. These

⁷⁹ Toni Cade Bambara, “What it is I think I’m doing Anyhow” The Writer on Her Work, ed Janet Sternburg (New York: Norton, 1980) 164.

⁸⁰ Bambara writes that many of her stories were inspired by broken covenants. Toni Cade Bambara, “Salvation is the Issue,” Black Women Writers (1950-1980) A Critical Evaluation ed. Mari Evans (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984) 47.

conflicts do not only affect the individual, Bambara's works emphasize the ways in which these rifts stunt the vibrancy of the community and disable it from functioning in a harmonious fashion. Bambara's internal critique of the Black community is a profound act of agape that instead of encouraging dissent, functioning as a mirror, exposes injury in order to enable healing and true revolution.

Most of the stories in Gorilla My Love share a common heroine, the young, quick-witted, and loyal Hazel. She religiously holds adults accountable to their word and is very outspoken when they do not make good on their promises. In the story "Gorilla My Love," Hazel and her brother go to see a film entitled "Gorilla My Love," but find that the theater owners have given the film a false title in order to mislead them into watching it. The film is in reality a boring Jesus story. Hazel leads youth in staging their own protest by chanting, they want their money back, running up and down the theater isles and generally "cutting up."⁸¹ The demonstration works and the film is changed, but to a cartoon they have already seen, so she decides to see the manager. Hazel stands her ground and refuses to leave the theater when the manager does not return the money and tells her to go home. She instead sets fire to the theater in protest. This arson enacts a micro version of an urban riot, where adults set fire to establishments when they feel that legal recourse is futile.

"Ice," a story in Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions, emphasizes the process through which two young girls push for accountability in their community. The story is told in the first person perspective from the point of view of a little girl who is unnamed. "Ice" takes place in the dead of winter in a working class Black neighborhood. The main plot follows the children's activism surrounding an abandoned litter of puppies they hope to protect from the winter weather. The girls go door-to-door to take up a collection to build the puppies a house. They are successful.

⁸¹ Toni Cade Bambara, Gorilla My Love (New York: Vintage, 1972)15.

But despite their efforts the puppies freeze to death, which for the children is primarily due to the adults' neglect. Bambara works into the narrative larger issues of activism as well. The main character's parents don't have enough money to heat the house through the winter and burn her doll house to keep the house warm. In the past the children had taken up a collection to send a neighbor to the hospital when the ambulance wouldn't take her without money. After the puppies die the main character goes door to door holding the adults in the neighborhood accountable for their neglect and they mumble grown up nonsense and can't look her in the eye. Their inability to look her in the eye demonstrates their acceptance of her ability to hold them accountable. The narrator explains that the grown ups are home all day because the hospital workers are on strike and the people who work at the bottling plant are laid off. So they have no excuse for not having kept an eye on the puppies. The parents' employment status is another seamless interweaving of political issues into the narrative. Door-to-door solicitation as a fund raising method to meet a community need, then holding the guilty parties accountable for not upholding their part of a contract are both strategies used by community organizers in grass-roots activism. Bambara's endowing of children with these strategies speaks of her immense respect for children's intelligence and resourcefulness.

"Happy Birthday," another story in Gorilla My Love, features a compelling account of both the process and outcome of lack of community accountability. In the story, the main character, Ollie, is neglected on her birthday. Her community does not uphold its responsibility to her, by abandoning her on a day that represents the celebration of her existence. Ollie's grandfather is an alcoholic in a drunken coma and will not wake up. Her best friend, a compulsive liar, chooses to overeat and watch TV rather than spend time with her. The big boys are so high on drugs that they can't focus and keep nodding off. She tries to get attention from several people in the

community and does not succeed. All of the grown-ups in the neighborhood are busy. Finally, fed-up with the lack of attention, she yells, “This time I’m going to fly off and kill myself” The pastor, who has forgotten her name, tells her to go play somewhere else, she can’t act up in front of the church. Ironically the pastor, whose job it is to concern himself with the state of people’s souls, thoroughly dismisses Ollie’s despair. Finally, at wit’s end, the little girl yells that it is her birthday. She is then even ignored by Hazel, our protagonist in “Gorilla My Love” who has grown into an older woman who dismisses her anger, saying, “when you get as old as me, you’ll be glad to forget all about [birthdays].”⁸² [W]hen Hazel’s great grandmother asks why Ollie is crying Hazel professes not to know: “[B]eats me, I don’t understand kids sometimes” she then proceeds to add a physical dimension to her dismissal of Ollie’s plight when she “closes the window so she can hear the television good.”⁸³ Hazel, who so stalwartly advocated her rights as a child against adult lies in “Gorilla My Love” betrays Ollie and has joined the ranks of insensitive grown ups herself. In this story both a family and community fail in their responsibility to honor a young girl’s life, represented by her birthday. The story holds the community accountable for the neglect of one of their members. The portrayal of Ollie’s endless search for company, everyone’s consumption with the petty details of their own lives, and their disregard for her considerable pain and growing anguish indicates both the breakdown and necessity of kinship networks. This neglect also predicts the growing narcissism of many inner city youth by raising the question: With growing anonymity in communities what will happen to our youth without adequate love and attention?

The issue of lack of accountability to children is further explored in “A Girl’s Story” from Gorilla My Love. The story describes the distressing outcome when a

⁸² Ibid 64.

⁸³ Ibid 65.

grandmother fails to educate a young girl about the changes that would take place in her body during puberty. When the story begins, Rae Ann huddles in shame on her bathroom floor, having started menstruating without prior knowledge that it would occur. She assumes she had done something wrong to be bleeding from her private parts. Her grandmother, M'Dear, is her guardian and, like many older generation, women did not teach her about menstruation. When Rae Ann tells her she is bleeding, the grandmother assumes she is suffering a botched abortion. Throughout this ordeal Rae Ann longs for Dada Bibi, the teacher at the community center who loves all the neighborhood children unconditionally. Dada Bibi teaches them about pride in self and race and about history.⁸⁴ Rae Ann is however afraid to leave the bathroom because she cannot staunch the flow of blood and she fears facing her taunting older brother Horace who cruelly makes fun of her and also assumes she's bleeding from an abortion. Rae Ann consoles herself by singing the Guinea-Bissau marching song that she learned at the community program. When M'Dear finally understands Rae Ann is only experiencing a regular menstrual cycle she goes to the grocery store and returns, throwing a bag of *Kotex* at Rae Ann. The girl still wonders what is wrong with her, what she did wrong. She calls on the strength she learned at the community center and resolves to find a plan. She decides to carefully read the *Kotex* package take the whipping from her grandmother and hug from Dada Bibi, and move on.⁸⁵

In "A Girl's Story" M'Dear did not fulfill her responsibility to Rae Anne by not teaching her about menstruation. As a consequence Rae Anne endures shame and confusion. Rae Ann's family is prepared for her to have had an illegal abortion but do not teach her about her body and how to prevent pregnancy. M'Dear is prepared to hand out whippings but not explanations. This gap in her family's affection and

⁸⁴ Ibid 162.

⁸⁵ Ibid 164.

information Rae Anne knows can be filled by Dada Bibi at the community center. Here, Bambara suggests that the revolution can fill in gaps in the family unit. Dada Bibi is a replacement mother for Rae Anne and the community center replaces outdated moral codes with more holistic ones. With such a fumbled job of accountability it is no wonder that at the end of the story Rae Anne is still confused at what it means to live for the people. She knows that she doesn't want to die for the people but does not actually know what to do to help free Blacks. Dada Bibi helps her to brainstorm what she can do to help the cause of liberation and be accountable to her community.⁸⁶

The foreman of a tenement building is made accountable to his community after he fondles and exposes himself to little girls in the "Basement" from Gorilla My Love. He breaks the unspoken agreement of his role as an elder male, a father or uncle in the community. He abuses his authority by taking advantage of the little girls. The story features Patsy's mother, Patsy's aunt, Patsy, and the narrator. Patsy's mother warns the two little girls to stay out of the basement because the foreman is known to molest little girls. When the girls tell her that he has already shown them his privates she flies into a rage and beats the "hell out of the super" to the point where, "his stockin cap goes' sailin' in the air."⁸⁷ The story emphasizes the necessity of women to educate one another. When the narrator presses for why they should avoid the basement, Patsy's Aunt explains:

Because some men when they get to drinking don't know how to behave properly to women and girls. Understand?... You, see, it's very hard to teach young girls to be careful and the same time not scare you to death. Sex is not a

⁸⁶ Ibid 163.

⁸⁷ Ibid 147.

bad thing. But sometimes it's a need that makes men act bad, take advantage of little girls who are friendly and trusting. Understand?"⁸⁸

In this story Patsy's mother establishes a women's circle where older women pass down knowledge to younger ones. She acts as an advocate for the girls who fights for them since they are "friendly and trusting." She also holds the super accountable for his mis-behavior by beating him.

When Miss Ruby, the white community worker, is not accountable to Punjab, one of the community's most formidable characters, she loses the community's trust. "Playing with Punjab," a story from Gorilla My Love, features a tough community girl narrator who works as Miss Ruby's assistant. Punjab, the local loan shark, has a reputation for being especially tough and inflexible in collecting debts. The name Punjab may refer to the eight-foot Indian figure in the "Little Orphan Annie" comic strip who was characterized as silent but deadly strong. Punjab develops a crush on Miss Ruby and shifts some of his community knowledge action to a more progressive cause. He bails out some of the community leaders, protects Miss Ruby, and brings food to the community center.

However in the election to pick community leaders for the poverty council Miss Ruby betrays the community people by not allowing Punjab to have a seat. She chooses an election process that alienates many of the citizens who assume Punjab will get the position because he is most suited for it. Instead the election, which most people don't show up for, yields two lack luster candidates. Miss Elaine, an elder in the community, confronts Miss. Ruby by standing up for Punjab, who, she states, every one knew "should be one of them peoples what go to places and talk with the Man. So I don't even see no sense whatever to these cards."⁸⁹ Miss Ruby ignores the

⁸⁸ Ibid 143.

⁸⁹ Ibid 74.

dissention and instead places her confidence in the vote and tells people they should have exercised their right as voters.⁹⁰ The next day the office is wrecked by vandals, probably Punjab himself. The community members agree that it was warranted and accuse Miss Ruby of betraying them. Sneakers, one of the Brothers from the neighborhood, expresses this sentiment, “Miss Ruby was full of shit with all her foolishness about power and equality and responsibility and then cop right out when the chips were down.” Miss Ruby’s investment in the organization’s vote, a process that the community did not believe in, and her refusal to make changes that would reflect their will, reflects a breach of their trust that cost her both Punjab’s and the community’s loyalty.

The Salt Eaters also features Velma’s single handed attempt to hold an outside force, The Transchemical nuclear energy plant, accountable for contaminating the Black community. Black women are at the center of The Salt Eaters, as in most of Bambara’s writing. Whites are alluded to, most often as an ominous outside threat to communal harmony but they are never allowed to take center stage. In The Salt Eaters the looming Transchemical plant represents the threat and power of Whites. When the citizens of Claybourne hold Transchemical accountable for hiking up energy rates, the company retaliates by padding local residents’ bills then cutting off their utilities when they protest. Transchemical’s bullying behavior represents the callous and uncaring nature of the White power elite in reference to Black health and wellbeing. In addition to price hiking the nuclear plant’s waste also causes cancer in workers and townspeople. Velma takes a computer job at Transchemical after resigning her position at the Academy of the Seven Arts. When the plant announces that someone wiped out the entire records Velma is called in for questioning. The identity of the culprit is never revealed. It was probably Velma however, who earlier in the novel

⁹⁰ Ibid 75.

had urged the women's political group "Women for Action" to incorporate nuclear energy into their long list of issues. Velma also planned to speak to lawyers about selling contaminated sludge to a burial ground for radio active waste in Alabama.⁹¹ By infiltrating the plant Velma could operate like "The spook who sits by the door," on the surface a collaborator but in reality a spy who will bring information back in order to feed the community. Velma's dual role as Transchemical employee and community informant introduces the broader theme of multiplicity of roles in the novel.

Aisha holds Cliff accountable for neglecting his child in "A Tender Man," a story in The Sea Birds are Still Alive. The main character Cliff is a Vietnam veteran turned liberal sociology professor. He impregnated a white woman then married her before leaving for the war. When the marriage doesn't work out, in fleeing a dysfunctional marriage he abandons his child. When his ex-wife breaks down, a mutual acquaintance, Aisha, offers to adopt the daughter. Aisha, a very straightforward Black woman, whom coincidentally he has been dating, works in a community health clinic. The story takes place in the dreary, bureaucratic clinic and at the Indian restaurant where Aisha and Cliff talk. Like most of Bambara's stories the plot line is not linear: "A Tender Man" involves shifts back and forth in time, Cliff moves from the present to the Vietnam War, to his childhood, then back to the present. These flashbacks are an opportunity to bring to light issues such as government subterfuge using Brothers to fight an illicit war against other Brothers in the Bay of Pigs, Cuba. Cliff also reflects on his own upbringing in a dysfunctional family. He was raised by smothering aunts who rescue him from a neglectful mother and a no-good father. His aunts warn him throughout his childhood not be a "philandering

⁹¹ Toni Cade Bambara, The Salt Eaters (New York: Random House, 1980) 207.

bastard” like his father and their various partners.⁹² Over dinner, Aisha lays out her issues with Cliff, she doesn’t understand him being with a White woman, a deadbeat dad, and she takes issue with pseudo-revolutionary Black men having children then not supporting them. She attempts to hold him accountable for his actions both verbally and by taking custody of his child, whom he has supported. At the end of the story, however, he decides he wants custody of his child and will be the man he set out to be, fulfill the promise he made to himself in Vietnam, to be a good father, a tender man.⁹³

The tender man is one who is accountable to women and children. The use of the phrase “a tender man” places the story “A Tender Man” in conversation with many of Bambara’s other works. The phrase reoccurs in “The Johnson Girls,” from Gorilla My Love, “Baby’s Breath” from Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions and The Salt Eaters. In “A Tender Man” Cliff becomes accountable over time. The Johnson girls dream of a tender man and Obie from The Salt Eaters, recast as Louis from “Baby’s Breath,” as tender men are already accountable though their partners but irresponsible in other ways. In “The Johnson Girls” when the women are discussing different categories of men, they agree that the most important type is the tender man. Sugar expresses this sentiment:

A tender man who is one who can tend to your tenderest needs. Maybe it means painting your room a dumb shade of orange... or holding your head while you heave your insides out into the toilet...Or maybe it’s just spoon feeding you and putting on your pink angora socks and rubbin’ your tired feet.⁹⁴

⁹² Toni Cade Bambara, The Sea Birds are Still Alive 134.

⁹³ Ibid 151.

⁹⁴ Toni Cade Bambara, Gorilla My Love 168-169.

The significance that Cliff wants to be a tender man is not lost on Aisha. She begins to give Cliff another chance despite his previous irresponsible behavior towards his child. As a tender man Cliff counters macho stereotypes. He can fulfill his commitments as both a father and a partner and reclaim his manhood from the specter of his own misdeeds, those of his wayward father, and from his aunts who overwhelm him with their continual warnings against being a “no good nigger.” He can also try to redress his inattention to his daughter, who, like Rae Ann in “A Girl’s Story,” as a child is the party most affected when adults don’t fulfill their obligations.

On that issue, the main character of “Baby’s Breath” is in many ways a continuation of the tender man character that appears in “A Tender Man,” “The Johnson Girls,” and The Salt Eaters. In the story Louis, a jazz musician, visits with his nosy, chatty mother, who wants to know why he hasn’t settled down with a nice girl. He is concerned because his girlfriends keep on aborting his babies. With the first abortion, the woman felt she was too young to have a baby and came from a pretentious family who thought she was too good for him. The second abortion was with a married woman who wanted to go back to her husband. The third abortion was from a woman who suffered toxemia, having poisoned the baby with junk food and alcohol. This is a similarity that he has with Obie in The Salt Eaters whose partners also aborted children that he wanted. Obie recounts:

And they’d loved him, at least they each said they did. But they kept killing his babies. Junk food addicts, toxemic pregnancies, miscarriages. Excited mothers to be, suddenly sullen and unreachable, terror-stricken abortions.⁹⁵

In “Baby’s Breath” there is a nearly identical sentiment: “And Norma had said she wanted the baby. Her enthusiasm waned, though....By the second month, she’d

⁹⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, The Salt Eaters 99.

grown unreachable and sullen.”⁹⁶ Louis later describes the non-receptive nature of his partners using sex as metaphor. “He would come to her with the light on and see her open, glistening, wet. But inside she was dry and no longer closed lovingly around him. Would clench her muscles too soon, too tight, and push him out.”⁹⁷ Bambara uses almost the exact same language in describing Velma’s rejection of Obie. “Her arousal was misleading, outside she is wet, inside dry, clinched against him.”⁹⁸ The women were sexually aroused but their wombs were not receptive to creating a family. Or like Velma they were not whole from defending themselves from the constant barrage of oppression. Velma asks “what type of broken, abused sister would want to kill your child, James?”⁹⁹ This sentiment is reflective of Norma, Louis’s girlfriend, who indeed seems broken, having lied about the abortion, calling it a miscarriage, dismissing the act because “The Easter outfit her parents had sent would fit now.”¹⁰⁰ Louis is a tender man, he desires his child and is ready to support it. With Norma he is alone in planning wedding arrangements, natural birth classes, and setting up housekeeping while she had grown detached. Unlike the men in Bambara’s essay “The Pill, Liberation or Genocide” in The Black Woman Louis does not want a child to support some misogynistic, egotistical misconception of revolution. He wants a child as an extension of his love for his partner. His behavior is in direct opposition to the stereotype of the irresponsible “fucked-up nigger man” in The Salt Eaters who impregnates women indiscriminately or in “A Tender Man” who, when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, his first inclination is to reply “not like my daddy” which has been burnt into his brain by overbearing aunts.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions 48.

⁹⁷ Ibid 48.

⁹⁸ Toni Cade Bambara, The Salt Eaters 163.

⁹⁹ Ibid 99.

¹⁰⁰ Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations 49.

¹⁰¹ Toni Cade Bambara, The Sea Birds are Still Alive 151.

Louis and Obie, are the good boys in the family; both having brothers in jail. Obie's brother Roland is in prison on Rikers Island for raping a forty-six year old woman. Louis is always compared to his brother who steals bikes, breaks windows, and brings the police to the house at all hours of the night.¹⁰² However when Louis laments the latest abortion, to his mother she holds him accountable for not being responsible in a tone she usually reserves for his "no-good father". She is angry at his romanticism because he is not investing in his music, "knocking up" women and coating it with romantic crap, with nothing to offer them.¹⁰³

Bambara's presentation of the tender man works to counter the stereotypical no good nigger, which is limiting both for Black men and the Black community because it doesn't allow wholeness, "Baby's Breath" is a detailed snapshot of Obie's story from The Salt Eaters. Through Obie's story we are able to envision a future for Louis, that may not entail paternity but does include fatherhood, in the form of Obie's adopted child, and while perhaps containing a loving partner, in the form of Velma, also concerns a lot of work, like supporting and sustaining Velma through her breakdown. Like most of Bambara's work, the tender man does not go without criticism. Louis' mother does not allow the reader to pity him for too long by pointing out his shortcomings. She equates his tenderness with weakness. Obie, with his mistress and the narcissistic "Brotherhood" is also not without weaknesses, and the tender man, from the Johnson girls is more of an ideal than a reality.

ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Toni Cade Bambara has never tried to cloak her investment in the Black community. She dedicated Tales and Stories for Black Folk to "the family at Home,

¹⁰² Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations 56.

¹⁰³ Ibid 55-56.

The family at Livingston,¹⁰⁴ *The Family at Large and especially to our Young*”. As the dedication suggests, these stories revolve around establishing collective responsibility. The book is a compilation of stories for young people, emphasizing the oral tradition, unveiling the sources of oppression, celebrating our unique traits, and identifying sources of strength. In her introduction, “Our great Kitchen Tradition” she roots the story, as a literary form, in the oral tradition that is integrally tied to truth telling. She writes that a story is something that is passed down from elders and consists of family tales such as how “Granddaddy Johnson used to ride the Baltimore and Ohio and get into... trouble...cause he just wouldn’t say ‘sir’ to no man.”¹⁰⁵ She goes on to look at the difference in the way slavery is presented in books as slaves loving their captivity and captors versus the truth of resistance, both overt and covert. She ends her introduction, acknowledging the importance of reading but emphasizing the importance of the oral tradition and listening to elders “for they are truth.”¹⁰⁶ This introduction paves the way for the rest of the book which will not be another set of half truths, like the aforementioned books on the Black experience, but that will tap into the Black oral tradition and continue in those customs of truth telling. The first half of the book includes stories such as Bambara’s own “Raymond’s Run,” Langston Hughes’s “Thank You M’am,” Alice Walker’s “To Hell with Dying,” and Ernest Gaines’s “The Sky is Gray.” The second half of the book consists of folk tales, many of which, such as “The Three Little Panthers,” “The Three Little Brothers,” and “The True Story of Chicken Licken” are culturally affirming retellings of the European tales in Black English, illuminating oppression and insisting on unification and struggle.

¹⁰⁴ Livingston College, is a part of the Rutgers University System in Newark, New Jersey where Toni Cade Bambara briefly taught English and Creative Writing

¹⁰⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, Introduction. *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* ed. Toni Cade Bambara (Zenith: New York 1971) 12.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid 12.

The parables in Tales and Stories for Black Folks are folk tales adapted from the original form by students in Bambara's writing class at Livingston College in New Jersey. The stories emphasize the social and political reality of urban Black young people who use Black English, participate in social movements, live in the ghetto and whose main enemy is "the man," the police, or the banker. The stories emphasize deploying critical consciousness and unity in order to solve problems.

ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH PERSONAL SACRIFICE FOR THE GREATER COMMON GOOD

Both "The Apprentice" and "Broken Fields Running" from Gorilla My Love involve issues of suppressing personal desires for the greater good of the community. "The Apprentice" revolves around the necessity of community organizers to serve the people and of respecting elders. The apprentice is a first-person narrative told from the perspective of a young woman who is learning to be a community organizer. Naomi, her mentor, is the tireless head Organizer who sees everything as an opportunity to galvanize people. The story begins with the pair observing a Brother being pulled over by a policeman. Naomi monitors the interaction, noting the policeman's badge number and license plate, in case she must make a police brutality report.

The two women later go to an old- folks home in order to encourage them to show up to a food bank event. The issue concerns them because many of the elders, living on fixed incomes are unable to afford food at the end of the month. One of the elders thanks them for listening to older people, for basing their campaign around their needs. He likens their work to his position as a church singer who required the congregation's response, prompted them with the phrase "Am I spoilin ya?"¹⁰⁷ He insists that there must be a call and response between the organizers and the elders and

¹⁰⁷ Toni Cade Bambara, Gorilla My Love 31.

through their actions they were asking the elders “Am I spoilin’ ya?” They are a servant of the people, not the other way around. The women attempt to end their day by going to Larry’s drive in, a diner, run by colored folks. However the place is understaffed and overrun with the over flow from an evening concert. Naomi then leads the women in helping to clean up and engage the staff in conversation about feeding people. They find out that Larry, the owner of the diner, wants to open up a modest-priced restaurant, patterned after father divine’s charity work, so that people can eat well cheaply.

There is tension in the story between the high personal cost of waging revolution and personal desire. For Naomi everything is a part of the struggle and she expects everyone else to be like-minded. When anyone tells her of a project, she waits patiently until they tell her how it is geared toward freeing the people. To the apprentice, who tires more easily, Naomi would say to her, at the end of a long day, that they “haven’t the right to feel tired.”¹⁰⁸ The apprentice is more skeptical at the loss of personal freedom and the tirelessness required of organizing. The grueling nature of the revolution is captured by the title “The Apprentice”: whereas Naomi has a name, her young assistant does not, which emphasizes the necessity to submerge her identity to the revolution and her secondary role to Naomi. The story ends with the narrator biting her tongue at expressing her fatigue because she knows Naomi will be condescending, because “she hadn’t earned the right.”¹⁰⁹ The apprentice notes how beat she is and that it had been a “long, long, long, day.”¹¹⁰ The story does not end with the narrator having accepted the tolls of organizing nor by extolling the virtues of the outcome of struggle despite the fatigue. Like The Salt Eaters, “The Apprentice” ends with fatigue; the tension is not resolved.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid 27.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid 42.

¹¹⁰ Ibid 42.

This theme of the toll of organizing is continued in the next story “Broken Field Running” where the protagonist, also an organizer, must struggle to find the motivation to continue her work. Dada Lacey, like the apprentice, is a community organizer. “Broken Field Running” is set in a frigidly cold urban jungle. As Dada Lacey and her partner escort children home after their community program, she intersperses the duties of dropping off the youth with commentary about the community and inequality. The story revolves around issues of racism in spatial configuration, hope in youth, and envisioning the future.

As Dada Lacey and Jason escort children home through the snow she remarks on the many ways that the housing projects discourage community and encourage violence and depression. She is seething mad about the ways in which space is embattled territory. She remarks on the rape in elevators and bushes and the lack of stoops or benches, for elders to survey the community. Another theme is the partnership between Lacey and Jason. This partnership helps to balance her anger. Jason’s important role as Lacey’s support takes a literal meaning as he stops her repeatedly from slipping in the snow. She is also on the verge of burn-out; her focus on the future is also slipping. Lacey is beginning to lose hope in change. The story ends with the young people dreaming out loud about the revolution. They agree that in this utopia all children will go to schools like their community school, there will be a new commitment to people in their life time, they will be able to trust people, and everyone will have enough. These reminders buoy DaDa Lacey and give her the energy she needs to keep organizing.

A Story such as” The War of the Wall” from Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions further problemize the issues of personal sacrifice for the greater common good by expressing a conflicted insider-outsider relationship between the organizer and the community. Bambara grapples with this issue in many of her stories such as

“Playing with Punjab” and “The Lesson.” Like the organizer in “The Lesson” who has nappy hair and doesn’t wear makeup the protagonist of “The War of the Wall” is a Black “hippy lady” who has come to do a mural on one of the city’s public walls. The story features the views of resentful local girls, who feel that their space has been violated by an outsider. The girls try everything to get the woman to stop the mural; they confront her, and they try to get their parents to intervene by insinuating and instigating. According to the girls the wall belongs to their community and the “hippy lady” does not. The wall is a part of their intimate space, and community narrative, which involves handball games and Mrs. Morrison’s son being arrested against that wall.

The “artist lady” exacerbates the distance between her and the community with her attitude and tendencies. She is anti-social. Not only does she not greet people, she outright ignores them. To make matters worse she rejects the admiration of the local lothario and rejects people’s food. She magnifies her difference from the people by insisting that the soul food restaurant fix her vegetarian food, a diet her “spiritual teacher” recommends. The young girls, vigilant observers of the woman’s rejection of their community mores, plan to deface the wall and locate a can of spray paint for the job. At the story’s climax the girls prepare to attack the wall with their spray paint and meet the whole community, which has come together to celebrate a breathtaking mural that stuns them all.¹¹¹

This story is in conversation with stories such as “The Apprentice” and “Broken Field Running,” where the community organizers are a seamless part of the community. The “artist lady” is more alien to the community than even the tireless White organizer in “Playing with Punjab,” who alienates her biggest fan despite her good intentions and less welcomed than the tiresome Black woman in “the Lesson,”

¹¹¹ Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions 66.

who at least receives the parents' approval. "The War of the Wall" introduces the Black, educated, new-age, organizer, who is well meaning and hopelessly eccentric. She is at odds with the "down" organizers from several of Bambara's other stories, who are an integral part of the communities they work in and embody the community's signifiers such as language and dress. The artist, however, gives a priceless gift to the community through her art despite her awkwardness. By placing another type of relationship on the continuum of organizer-community interactions Bambara is encouraging contributing to the community in a form that uses a person's strengths. This stance represents a shift in Bambara's perspective. Stories such as "Playing With Punjab," "The Apprentice," "The Organizer's Wife," and "Broken Fields Running," portray grassroots organizing as the only appropriate form of resistance.

"Luther on Sweet Auburn" from Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions further explores the tension between organizer and community. The narrator, a former community organizer, turned playwright, runs into Luther, one of her former co-workers and clients, who thinks she is still a youth worker. Luther wants her help meeting his basic needs. He tells his long drawn out, down-on-luck tale about babies, reform school, drugs, and jail. She, however, has moved on. Prior to their encounter she had left a political meeting and is rushing to rehearse her new play, an activist theater production about hostage-keeping.

The narrator launches into her history with the community. After beginning a position as a community worker she hired Luther, a gang-affiliated graffiti artist in the area, as an art instructor, despite the disapproval of the community center's Director. This new Luther no longer does art. The narrator describes Luther as having a dependency complex, "Luther, who's all about need and you gotta help me."¹¹² He is

¹¹² Ibid 80.

stunned that she no longer does social work and presses the narrator to help him anyway. He is accustomed to relying on Black women who fill roles in his life such as “Big sister, little mama, always there,” to depend on, lean on, take care of his problems. The narrator holds him accountable for helping himself. She asks him how old he is; questions his dependency, and informs him she is only five years older than him. He is surprised because he always assumed the age gap was larger because she took care of him. She asks how did the 1960s pass him by, since he was in such close proximity to CORE with its values of self-determination.

This story is a continuation of the Man-child sub-narrative in The Salt Eaters, however in that story the Black woman gives into the welfare man’s pining, whining, and physical threats and gives him the change that is supposed to buy her children’s food. She is a superwoman, resigned to both her role and the Black man’s dependence. However in this story the organizer, who was originally attracted to men like Luther has become radicalized. Though she politely listens, she refuses to solve Luther’s problems for him and also holds him accountable, asking him how he did not get involved politically and questions some of the self-sabotaging techniques that get in the way of his liberation. She however ignores several issues such as the possibility that Luther may have lacked a parent with political conscious like her own or the push or funding needed for higher education.

VALIDATION THROUGH COMMUNITY

“And Baby Jason crying too. Cause he is my blood brother and understands that we must stick together or be forever lost.”¹¹³

Hazel’s statement in “Gorilla My Love” expresses her connection to her baby brother, who cries in sympathy with her when her uncle betrays her trust by lying to

¹¹³ Toni Cade Bambara, Gorilla My Love 20.

her. Community is the common denominator in most of Bambara's stories. It is the fabric that connects and sustains the characters.

Stories such as "Happy Birthday," "Playing with Punjab," "The Lesson," and "the Basement" from Gorilla My Love and "Broken Fields Running," "The Long Night," and "A Girl's Story," from The Sea Birds are Still Alive are urban stories. They feature descriptions of various people living in the neighborhood. These figures add texture to the story and serve as the busy backdrop over which the story is set. There is a steady stream of elders hanging out of windows acting as surveillance over the community, such as Hazel in "Happy Birthday," or Aunties who give advice such as in "The Basement." There are bullies, number runners, pimps, thugs, grannies, grocers, and community workers. The effect is a network of voices and a sense of interdependence of characters, a sense of extended family. When one of the characters fails to uphold their duty or abuses their position such as the superintendent in "The Basement" who molests little girls, or the whole community in "Birthday" which forgets a little girl's birthday, then there is a sense of a large travesty having occurred. "Raymond's Run" and "The Johnson Girls" and The Salt Eaters exemplify this aspect of community as protection, support, and the passing down of vital knowledge.

In "Raymond's Run" from Gorilla My Love the protagonist, Squeaky supports building community by protecting her mentally retarded older brother Raymond and attempting to make alliances with other girls despite their superficial tendencies. She beats up any other kids who pick on Raymond, even though she is small and younger than he. She is singularly focused on winning the race at the school's spring festival. She practices daily for it, by doing different breathing and muscle building exercises. Her brother, whom she must watch, practices with her. She fights with jealous girls in the neighborhood who pick on Raymond as a way of showing resentment toward her. In the spring festival, instead of sports many of the same girls do the maypole dance.

Squeaky questions the logic of acting out female gender stereotypes in the dance. She points out the irony of the dance, where girls have to dress up only to get the clothes dirty and try to act like a fairy or flower instead of acting like themselves. She mourns the lack of community amongst girls, but instead builds her bond with her brother, who though, retarded, expresses more integrity than the “sissified” girls.

On the day of the spring festival Squeaky runs valiantly and beats Gretchen, her arch nemesis. Raymond runs alongside them and beats both of the girls. Squeaky decides then that she will retire and train Raymond. In congratulating, she makes peace with Gretchen and they share a partial smile. She says that the smile is as close as they can come to a real smile, because, as girls, they practice being flowers and fairies as opposed to real people. Here Squeaky gives a feminist critique of the girls’ attempts to contort themselves to meet an unrealistic standard of beauty. She advocates community by not only illuminating the superficial issues that prevent girls from uniting but she overcomes them by making forays toward another girl. She also expresses solidarity and further builds community with her brother. Instead of expressing jealousy at his win, she graciously sacrifices her running career to train him. The story is called “Raymond’s Run” not Squeaky’s Run, though the emphasis is on Squeaky’s preparations for the race. Though Squeaky prepared for the race, Raymond won. Squeaky and Raymond are interdependent subjects, which in turn, emphasizes interdependence within community. The title also underscores the need to submerge personal wants to the good of the community, a topic that Bambara frequently accentuates in her stories about community struggle, where the protagonist must sacrifice for progress to occur.

The budding friendship between girls in “Raymond’s Run” is deepened in the strong women’s kinship ties in “The Johnson Girls,” where the women bond together in order to affirm their experiences and teach the next generation. “The Johnson Girls”

expresses the necessity of women's community. The story is an extended conversation between Black women against the backdrop of Inez's preparations to depart in order to recapture her errant partner. As in "The Basement" the primary role of this community in this story is to pass on necessary knowledge. It is the role of older women to school a younger Sister on the true nature of love and relationships, especially the particular rules for Black women. The story is intergenerational, figuring in an older woman, several middle aged, and a teenaged character who discuss love and sex. They pass valuable lessons to the young woman, at the same time giving Inez the strength and support she needs for her journey by affirming their experiences.

Great Ma Drew is the housekeeper and matriarch who presides over the family, though it is Inez who owns the home. She sets the stage for the intimate Sister circle by speaking of the importance of women's kinship networks. In the first pages of the story Great Ma Drew mourns the state of younger women's romantic affairs and blames this on the fact that older women are not teaching younger women about men, charms, and reading signs. She then recommends that Inez use juju to help change her partner's mind about leaving her. She is also a root worker, or traditional healer, who uses herbs in order to help steer events in a certain course. She reads a pack of playing cards like tarot cards in attempts to help to mend the rift between Inez and her partner. Great Ma Drew's use of herbs affirms African traditional medicinal knowledge. The use of herbal medicine is also woman-focused and intimate. It honors both nature and ancestry.

Inez's room is packed full of her women friends. The close-knit nature of the community is underscored by the title "The Johnson Girls" though we never find out which of the women are related by blood and which of them, extended kin. The women's relationship is also communicated in their spatial configuration and speech.

Literally, there is no room to turn around.¹¹⁴ They finish one another's sentences and interrupt each other as they all attempt to pack Inez's suitcase. As they literally pack her suitcase they also emotionally give her the materials she needs for her coming trip. The young narrator explains the important role the women play in nurturing Inez and making communal decisions. "It always winds up to this when there's some big things in Inez's life and all her friends gather. And everybody lays out their program, they exchange advice and yell at each other's stupidities and trade stories and finally lay the consensus thing to be done on Inez." The women support one another on many levels. Great Ma Drew works with the spirits, the women buoy Inez with the courage she needs to sustain herself and they also discuss relationships for Black women. This story-telling is critical because it works to educate the young narrator and to reinforce the women's own experiences. The women use their own experiences as a way of constructing knowledge. It is the validating of their experiences that gives Inez the courage she needs to confront her partner.

Inez's friends discuss the double standard between Black men and women as it is manifested in romantic relationships. It is significantly more difficult for Black women to find a man than for Black men to find a woman. One of the women laments that

A man, no matter how messy he is can always get some good woman, two or three for that matter. But a woman? If her shit ain't together she can forget it...But if she got her johnson together, is fine in her do, superb in her work, and terrible, terrible extra plus with her woman thing, and a Great Ma Drew to work roots for her well...¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Ibid 166.

¹¹⁵ Ibid 172.

Bambara however misses this opportunity to raise political consciousness by delving into issues such as violence, incarceration, and disease that skew the gender ratio in the Black community so heavily that a Black man can realistically have two to three women. A racist employment system also means that many Black men were denied jobs and Black women, thought to be more acceptable, were able to find jobs though often lower paid. This issue of Black women out-achieving Black men also touches on a core theme of dividedness between Black men and women that can deter attention away from the real enemy, the power structure. The women express this division between Black men and women in terms of the fragmented nature of Black men.

The women mourn that as Black women it is difficult to find a well rounded man. Instead they must settle for certain core qualities, one at a time in a man. The women divide these men into several categories. They debate the relative strengths and weaknesses of the “handy man,” “fucking man,” “go-around man,” “gopher man,” “money man,” and the “tender man.”¹¹⁶ The women finally reject having to settle for a fragmented man and demand everything. This choice is significant. It is the women’s community, the validating of each other, that enables the women to come to this critical consciousness, this valuing themselves enough not settling for a fractured man. “A la carte is a bitch”¹¹⁷ Sugar announces, referring to having to settle for one aspect of a man at a time. The women all agree that Inez’s man is worth fighting for, because he is all of the above categories, a “blue light special.”¹¹⁸ The story ends with the women designing a plan to get Roy back. For the first time in the story the women give him a name. He is not generalized into one of the above categories. He is now a whole person, as a community they have validated him, and decided that he is worth

¹¹⁶ Ibid 172.

¹¹⁷ Ibid 175.

¹¹⁸ Ibid 177.

fighting for. They then mobilize in order to heal this rift in their community by communally examining the letter he wrote to Inez before leaving.

Another powerful area of contention Bambara addresses in her works and especially in the story “The Johnson Girls,” is the important role of space in both resistance and oppression. Many of Bambara’s stories acknowledge the potency of claiming and reclaiming space both physically and emotionally. In “The Johnson Girls” the community of women creates a safe gendered space to process and act upon the unique problems they face as Black women. This women’s space is marked by the closeness of their bodies. The space is also marked by the colorful feminine clothing that the women pull from closets and drawers as they attempt to help Inez pack for her imminent trip to confront her partner who has left her. It is through the creation of a safe space that they are able to voice the particular nexus of romantic issues they encounter as Black women. The women lament the double standard between Black men and women that means that they can rarely find a man that meets all of their standards, though men can easily access good Black women. The women’s space enables them to move from articulating the issues, to expressing sadness and anger, onto action. At the end of the story one of the women makes the decision to stop settling for the wrong man and the women decide to help Inez construct a strategy for recapturing her errant partner, who they decide is worth the time and effort. It is only through the creation of this space however that the women are able to express, reaffirm their truth, and move to praxis.

Space is also a powerful metaphor in The Salt Eaters. Velma’s breakdown is characterized by her increasing detachment from her home and family as well as a growing sense of isolation and fear. It is conversely the community and a renewed attachment to space that enables her to heal. At the advent of her illness Velma wishes

that she could withdraw to a safe place where “no one can reach.”¹¹⁹ She wants to be “inaccessible,” “unavailable,” “sealed off.”¹²⁰ She equates her physical and spiritual state to being in a precinct, or interrogation room. Velma’s mental state is described in terms of disequilibrium: “everything was out of whack, the relentless logic she’d lived by sprung.”¹²¹ Her sister reports that Velma wanders around like a zombie, mumbling to her sister about migraine and a “nightmare or bad feeling she cannot shake.”¹²² Obie describes Velma as not being able to relax, walking jags, talking jags. Her conversations with him are shallow, she holds him off, shutting herself off both of them. She begins checking and rechecking the door knobs, making sure she can get out. She veers to avoid things he can’t see, and stifles screams for things he can’t explain. Velma’s increasing paranoia, a manifestation of her decenteredness, grows until it culminates in her suicide attempt.

As faith healer, Minnie Ransom, works on healing Velma, she is surrounded by twelve elders known as the Master’s Mind who hum a droning hummingsong while Ransom does her work. They create a sacred space in the otherwise sterile clinic. They represent the harmony and foundation of community. The role of the community is essential and active in helping Velma to shake the grip of her sickness as it takes the hard praying to bring her through to the other side. Their goal is to help her return to the best of herself because, as one of the Brothers says, the cost of being sick is a “false feeling of uniqueness.”¹²³ Velma’s sickness removes her as a vibrant, contributing member of the community, and it is therefore their duty and her responsibility to get well.

¹¹⁹ Ibid 5.

¹²⁰ Ibid 19.

¹²¹ Ibid 95.

¹²² Ibid 140.

¹²³ Ibid 107.

SEVEN SISTERS AS PROTOTYPE

In The Salt Eaters Bambara posits The Seven Sisters theater collective as a powerful example of unity and possible solution to intra-community schism. The activist theater troupe performs at marches and rallies. In the theater collective the seven women represent main groups of women of color, containing Black, Asian, Latina, and Native American members. In the Greek myth the seven sisters or Pleiades are continually pursued by Orion until Zeus transforms them into doves and then to stars. In the Pleiades star cluster only six of the stars shine brightly, the seventh shines dully because the corresponding sister is mourning the death of a lover. This seventh, dull, star can represent Velma who is mourning the loss of herself in the face of her breakdown and suicide attempt. In direct contrast to the Greek myth they are not victimized, they are powerful, “bossy,” and self-determined. They free themselves; they do not wait for a patriarch to do it for them. Their cohesion is communicated by a mixture of voices. They speaking in one voice, with many accents, and finish each other’s sentences.¹²⁴ They also maintain their connection to the spirits by practicing a mix of religions. They represent Bambara’s quest to overcome false dichotomies; they represent a melding of the political, artistic, and spiritual.

II. Fighting False Dichotomies

One of the reoccurring themes in Bambara’s work is fighting false dichotomies or resisting the urge to falsely dichotomized different aspects of the self and community. One of the ways that her works counter false dichotomies is through featuring complex characters that fight against attempts to bisect their multi-faceted identities. In The Salt Eaters the protagonist’s attempt to bifurcate herself leads to her breakdown. “In My Man Bovanne” and “Witchbird” the protagonists’ struggle to

¹²⁴ Ibid 68.

reflect their identities illuminates the limitations of not only the individuals who seek to constrain them but also the weakness of society which attempts to narrow their distinctiveness.

In “My Man Bovanne,” from Gorilla My Love, a group of young nationalists attempt to view their mother in a dichotomized fashion which de-sexualizes her because she is an elder. They do not see their mother as a whole person and thus fail in their responsibility to truly honor the elders and their community. In the novel’s opening scene the mother, Ms. Hazel, (presumably the adult version of Hazel, the recurring child character) appreciates dancing close to Mr. Bovanne, an older blind man. Her children take offense, and accuse her of acting like a bitch in heat.¹²⁵ Much to her children’s chagrin the mother drinks, laughs too loud and wears a wig with cornrows underneath (the children agree that the wig must go but the cornrows are authentically Black). The children’s embarrassment may also allude to a certain amount of upward mobility that has led them to scoff at their mother’s “low class ways” which they seek to leave behind. Her children call themselves Black Nationalists, a movement built on understanding the past. They however dismiss and disregard the elders, those who made history. They use rhetoric which glorifies the past but is not invested in respecting the lives and opinions of older people. Here Bambara makes a critique on some Nationalists whose words do not match their actions. One of Ms. Hazel’s sons beseeches her to act her age but then does not know her age. She mourns that her children don’t understand her, especially when the daughter who is closest to her joins ranks with the others. This special child that “she carried strapped to her chest until she was nearly two” treats her like a stranger in efforts to uphold their concept of Black Nationalist aesthetics.

¹²⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, Gorilla My Love 5.

In “My Man Bovanne” Bambara critiques a shallow understanding of Black Nationalism. The children’s politics are concerned with making the older people conform to nationalist ideals which don’t correspond to their realities. Fed up with her children’s meddling, their mother leaves the community get together with Mr. Bovanne. They go to her house where she proceeds to bathe and tuck him in. Their relationship is not sexual, she says that “you have to take care of the older folks, [it is] the folks who support the people who do the organizing.” She quotes the nationalist rhetoric of one of her children who touts that “old folks is the nation.”¹²⁶ The children’s quote refers to her as the “old folks” but she refers to Mr. Bovanne. Here she takes the place of the ideal revolutionary while the “real” revolutionaries are consumed with ego, vanity, and their concept of what the revolution should look like but without the follow-through.

Like Ms. Hazel, in “My Man Bovanne,” Honey, the main character from “Witchbird,” from The Sea Birds are Still Alive, fights having her identity dichotomized. The story follows her aversion to being entrapped in stereotypical “mammy” roles as both an actress and a woman. The tale ends with her push toward self-definition. She claims that she will write new scripts and songs for Black women that recognize the whole of their beings.

The story begins with Honey’s dream, which features a roguish Black “witchbird” figure. This mythical figure of her imagination tries to lure her onto a motorcycle then a train in order to deliver a change of pace. She refuses him, she doesn’t trust him. He tries to lure her away with him using a pair of golden tasseled house shoes, which are a sign of “mammyfication.” Honey’s refusal of the witchbird’s offer signifies her decision to take control of her life, not to be seduced or

¹²⁶ Ibid 12.

victimized away from reality, which is that she is a middle aged African American actress facing limited options but prepared to resist.

Honey is, first of all, tired of her vain manager, Heywood, who is perhaps the witchbird in human form, who brings his ex-women to her house to board, cry the blues, without paying rent. He also seeks to limit her to the role of a sex-less mammy figure. She says of Heywood: “he makes me feel more mother or older sister, though he four months to the day older than me. He’s got me bagged somehow. Put me in a bag when I wasn’t looking. Folks be sneaky with their scenarios and secret casting.”¹²⁷

Using Honey as a “mammy,” he deposits his heart-broken ex-girlfriends at her house for her to nurse. She is tired of being taken for granted as a depository for his indiscretions. She wants the women to go so she can have peace. Second of all, she is tired of stereotypical roles for Black women. She is often cast as a mammy and tells of trying to retain her integrity while doing these roles. Once she played the part with a kente cloth apron, the only change she could make in the costume. She wants to work up a new script to free up Black women who have been stereotyped. She wants to write them a new song. These women call to her, driving her crazy with the weight of all the silences. The stories of real life Black women like the Voodoo Queens, Maroon Guerillas, and Seminole women swim in her head how, hungering for escape, for her to write their stories.

Honey returns home from her latest production in NewYork not just fatigued but “zombie-like,” with caked-on white make-up and a wig, which her beautician refers to as “the hair of a dead white woman.”¹²⁸ She is tired from the weight of both the limitations of her present roles and the sisters’ stories which have yet to find voice.

¹²⁷ Ibid 183.

¹²⁸ Ibid 181.

Her healing begins at the beauty parlor, a gendered space, with a laying on of hands as the beautician scratches her dandruff and rubs hot oil into her scalp. The women then start the ritual of sharing their stories, cracking jokes, and telling cautionary tales. Among them are anecdotes about Heywood who seeks to “mammify” her, “Like you ain’t got nuthin’ better to do with ya tits but wet-nurse his girls,”¹²⁹ Bertha says, illuminating Heywood’s inclination to rob Honey of her sexuality in order to use her to mother his ex-girlfriends. The women go on to talk about a Sister who is trying to support her man through a drug addiction. The stories become too much to bear and the heretofore stalwart Honey starts to cry and finally to talk. She says that she knows that she will talk herself hoarse and will not be able to sing later.¹³⁰ In her discussion of playing mammies on stage and in her personal life Honey expresses the conflicting relationship between her outside, performed self and the protected, sacred, self. Here she has decided not to perform but to speak her truth to her circle of women friends who can affirm her words and, in turn, her life. They are all the type of women whose lives she wants to write about in her song.

The Salt Eaters illuminates false dichotomies in the process of Velma’s break down and healing as well as in the unresolved political tension within the Black community. The similarity of diverse spiritual practices and divisive nature of dichotomies is articulated by Campbell: a jaunty, intelligent, high spirited, young man who works as a waiter at a downtown café:

He knew he’d struck gold. Knew in a glowing moment that all the systems were the same at base--voodoo, thermodynamics, I Ching, astrology, numerology, alchemy, metaphysics, everybody’s ancient myths--they were

¹²⁹ Ibid 181.

¹³⁰ Ibid 186.

interchangeable, not at all separate much less conflicting. There were the same, to the extent that their origins survived detractors and perverters.¹³¹

This merger of beliefs and ideas is further represented in the fusion of traditional and modern medicine as represented in the Southwest Infirmary and the works of Minnie Ransom. Through its fusion of western medicine and traditional arts it acknowledges both aspects of African Americans' hybridized identities. Minnie Ransom's healing style also features a mixture of both the traditional and the modern. It is both African and European-based. Minnie's healing style uses biology, traditional African-American "laying on of hands," and elements of Yoruba spirituality. Through the help of her spirit guide, Old Wife, she is able to "see" into a person's body, to see biologically what is wrong, then she channels a healing force to heal the wound. Minnie communicates this mixture of traditions in her description of a diagnosis and healing. "You [Old Wife] said to check in the floor of the third ventricle. So I did and zapped a little energy up there near the pineal, and those lavender beams commenced to glowMalignant ependyma attempting to take up residence in the base of the brain"¹³² Though the diagnosis is through western biological terms, the cure is spiritual. The pineal gland, known as the third eye, in many spirituality traditions is the home of the spiritual knowledge. Rene Descartes referred to the Pineal as the "seat of the soul." In humans its biological function is to regulate body rhythms such as sleep and it plays a large role in sexual development and aging.¹³³ Minnie's choice to work on the pineal gland represents a mixture of both the biological and spiritual because of its dual function. The Pineal is the center for navigation in birds. A weak pineal, or third eye in humans could therefore represent a loss of both spiritual and physical direction. This is the case of Minnie's bereaved

¹³¹ Ibid 210.

¹³² Ibid 45.

¹³³ "Pineal Gland." Encyclopedia Britannica (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2001) 437.

patient with the malignant ependyma, whose mother recently passed away. She wants to die or to take a pill to make the grief go away. She crawls into Minnie Ransom's lap in hopes of escaping her pain. Minnie mourns the lack of backbone in young people today who she feels have lost direction because they don't know how to heal themselves. Minnie claims that this new generation has indeed lost their powers of navigation. She says to Old Wife, "They don't know what they want to be healthy for....They don't know we are on the rise, our time is now, we must claim the new age is in our own name, we must rescue the planet"¹³⁴ Here Minnie mourns that the younger generation of Black youth are so caught up in victimhood that they have lost the ability to tap into the spiritual realm, which, to her, is tied to revolution, indicated in her statement that we must reclaim the world.

In addition, Minnie's beliefs are also a mixture of African and Africanized Christian. Minnie tells her spirit guide she thinks Vera is a child of Osun, the Yoruba deity of self-love, women, romance, and wealth. She goes on to call on the Loas, the Haitian Voodoo term for Yoruba deities, for help. Furthermore Minnie rejects a split between technology and tradition when she first plays the music of the Loas on a cassette tape and later plays John Coltrane, when Velma finally completes her transition to wellness.

Obie, Velma's over-worked husband, tries to hold together the dichotomous clashing elements of the Black community represented in the warring faction in the Seven Arts Community center. Ahiro, the masseuse at the Center, when massaging Obie's over-tense body, says what he really needs is to cry, "The body needs to throw off its excess salt for balance. Too much salt and the wounds can't heal."¹³⁵ This reference to an overabundance of salt refers to a lack of balance politically as

¹³⁴ Toni Cade Bambara, The Salt Eaters 46.

¹³⁵ Ibid 164.

represented by the Academy of the Seven Arts Center which is threatened by factiousness. These seven arts: performing arts, marital arts, medical arts, scientific arts, and arts and humanities are the areas the founders felt the people needed for revolution, but a disrespect for multiplicity has turned differences into rifts. The Center holds “all the old ideological splits [of the Black community]: street youth as vanguard, workers as vanguard, self-determination in the Black Belt, Black rule of US, strategic coalitions, independent political action.”¹³⁶ One faction wants to focus on Spiritual arts and strip it of mundane concerns like race, class, and struggle, the other faction wants the other’s concerns thrown out and to focus on politics. These factions not only threaten to tear the center apart but also retard political growth in the Black community.

Women for Action, the political group that Velma and many of the other Black women of the town found, refuse the false dichotomy of political issues. Women for Action organizes around drugs, prisons, alcohol, schools, rape, battered women, abused children, and nuclear power. Whereas their male counterpart, The Brotherhood, isn’t doing anything about organizing, instead they debate.¹³⁷ Women for Action’s acknowledgement of key political imbalances, especially sexism in the Black community, leads them to a more holistic perspective and also illuminates gender imbalance within Black community groups. The group began as a splinter group from the larger political organization in which the women did all of the work while “the men do nothing but meet over drinks and they reap all of the rewards.”¹³⁸ Here Bambara alludes to gender imbalance in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements where women were limited to doing support work regardless of their skills and were expected by their male counterparts to work behind the scenes while

¹³⁶ Ibid 90.

¹³⁷ Ibid 198-199.

¹³⁸ Ibid 37.

they made the decisions and the public appearances.¹³⁹ Lonnie, one of the Brothers in the larger political organization, stares at Daisy's breasts during a community meeting. This objectifying act, by sexualizing her, refuses to acknowledge her as a political ally. Another of the men has cautioned the women that they should curb their input, thus silencing them. The difference between the men and women politically is emphasized by Velma, whose menstrual cycle begins during this meeting. She is bleeding heavily, and without adequate sanitary supplies, is forced to sit on a squishy rolled up paper towel. The marginalizing effect of Velma's biological femaleness is the metaphor for the social and political marginalizing of females in the Movement. The episode at the community meeting reminds Velma of another experience illustrating gender inequity as a part of her political work in the Black community. After a Civil Rights March, Velma finds herself in a hotel lobby attempting to make a phone call. After a long, grueling day she is menstruating, dirty, and exhausted, with her feet bleeding and blistered. She spies the politically banal Black speaker from the rally in red silk pajamas surrounded by an entourage. She is enraged at the disparity between herself, having put in so much work, organized, raised money to host the speaker, and the Brother, whose ironic association with the red of her menstrual period is his pajamas that reek of his privilege and disassociation with the masses. Vera attacks him and is thrown out of the hotel. Afterwards, she is calmed, and her feet are bathed by her M'Dear. She is rendered whole by her women's community.

The issues of countering false dichotomies is furthered in the story "Madame Bai and the Taking of Stone Mountain" in Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions which features bridging spiritual-political schism. The protagonist serves as English tutor and resident counselor to several international students. One of them invites

¹³⁹ Toni Cade Bambara, "On the Issue of Roles" The Black Woman, ed. Toni Cade Bambara. (New York: Penguin, 1970) 107.

Madame Bai, a Korean martial arts and spiritual arts teacher, to begin a studio school. Madame Bai promptly steals all of the protagonist's students. The narrator, however, studies with Madame Bai and discovers a way of blending the political with the spiritual that makes her a better organizer.

After joining Madam Bai's class she learns body-mind-spirit connection. This connects to her political work because it makes her a better searcher as a part of the citizen search team for the murdered children. She learns to "be still" to "silence the chatter" to be aware of intuition.¹⁴⁰ This in turn makes her a better organizer "she appoints herself town crier, alarm clock [o]f the neighborhood who continue to monitor *The Klan*, organize, analyze, agitate, and keep watch over the children."¹⁴¹

This direct way in which the spiritual has affected the political is a continuation of Velma's story in *The Salt Eaters*. "Madame Bai and the Taking of Stone Mountain" demonstrates the way in which greater spiritual awareness can enhance activism. In *The Salt Eaters* this issue is left open ended when the novel comes to a close. Though activism requires the organizer to agitate others in order to move them out of apathy and to action, it collapses when the organizer herself is agitated as in the case of Velma's breakdown. The protagonist of "Madame Bai" admits that with the decrease in internal chatter she is able to be a better activist.

Madame Bai asks the narrator one question as a final exam for the program, "What is the Stone Mountain for?" She refers to the Stone Mountain Confederate Memorial Carving, which depicts three Confederate heroes of the Civil War: Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. The protagonist's political consciousness screams out that Stone Mountain is for imperialism. She is disappointed because she thinks her Korean

¹⁴⁰ Toni Cade Bambara, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations* 39.

¹⁴¹ Ibid 39.

teacher wants a history lesson. Madame Bai, however gives her a wholly different answer than she expected, “Stone Mountain, is for taking.”¹⁴² Madame Bai’s answer combines both the spiritual and the political. Politically the answer connotes that the power of the elites is for taking through struggle. This is represented in the Confederate memorial, which was begun in 1916 and was completed only in 1962, perhaps as backlash to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Spiritually, the only way a stone mountain, by nature huge and immovable, can be taken is by immense inner resources. One becomes a mountain, which is by nature solid, still, and non-responsive. This involves the Buddhist theory of doing, through non-doing, of overcoming a feat not through trying to change the problem but through changing one’s reaction to it. Madame Bai’s answer reflects Velma’s conclusion in The Salt Eaters that political challenges cannot be overcome by internalizing anger and grief; instead one must be still and connected to inner resources in order to be of use to both self and community.

IV. Reconstructing Historical Memory

In The Salt Eaters the act of reconstructing historical memory is pivotal in the process of healing. Velma is told by a woman with snakes in her hair that she must “differentiate between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning in to salt, which is succumbing to the serpent.”¹⁴³ This harmful aspect of salt also references the plight of Lot’s wife in Genesis who, when led from Sodom and Gomorra by angels, defies their warning and looks back at the burning city, turning to a pillar of salt.¹⁴⁴ In The Salt Eaters this parable references an unhealthy attachment to the past and an unwillingness to grow. Obie urges Velma to be emotionally courageous. He wants to help her to let go of past pain. She is, however, so invested in wallowing in old

¹⁴² Ibid 44.

¹⁴³ Ibid 163.

¹⁴⁴ The Holy Bible, Genesis 19:24, King James Version.

political struggles that she literally can't hear him. He asks how long she is going to obsess about past hurts, she replies, "Until I get my pint of blood."¹⁴⁵ Pain and anger have a tight grip on Velma, which facilitates her breakdown. She has invested in politics to the detriment of her spirit. She is unable to call upon "the powers of the deep" in order to heal. It is only through reconstructing historical memory in the form of reclaiming ancestors, African spirituality and community that Velma is able to reach stasis.

As Velma sits on the stool in the infirmary, her mind wanders through the various hurts that have brought her to the edge of insanity. In her head, she replays scenes of police brutality during Civil Rights demonstrations, the threat of nuclear holocaust, the rift between Black men and women, the schism in her own marriage, a miscarriage, and finally the crippling of Smitty, her former fiancé, who was beaten at an anti-war demonstration and left a quadriplegic. With this last horrific act she makes up her mind to commit suicide.

In the novel one aspect of historical memory is represented by the ancestors. Velma's breakdown is marked by her rejection of the Mud Mothers, or the primordial ancestors who hold "the powers of the deep." The Mothers try to communicate with her repeatedly. In one scene they call to her through an attic mirror. They try to tell her what must be done in order for her to retain balance and reclaim her spirituality. She is terrified of them and angry for the intrusion on her understanding of the world. She seeks to shut them up, rejecting them, saying they can't run her out of her own attic. The Mud Mothers call her to reclaim her past, ancestry, and spiritual renewal. With Minnie's help she is eventually willing to go to this marsh and confront it. When she emerges from this metaphysical space, the physical wounds she inflicts on her wrists during her suicide attempt begin to heal. With healing good memories start to

¹⁴⁵Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* 23.

come, instead of only the painful ones. She is flooded with warm childhood memories of being loved and supported by her family.

“Going Critical” is exceptional because Bambara gives hints at her intended legacy. Both Those Bones are not My Child and “Going Critical” approach memoir, which is a marked difference from her earlier work which she warned against reading as autobiographical.¹⁴⁶

The essence of “Going Critical” is a mother and daughter’s negotiation of the mother’s death. Clara, despite her daughter’s unwillingness, is organizing for the end of her life, and trying to communicate a type of living will. Above all she wants her daughter, who has spiritual healing powers to use them properly and warns her against those who abuse their gifts for money and have no principles.

Clara is dying of cancer that she contracted at the Army’s nuclear testing facility, which put the service people in danger and contaminated the earth and Clara’s body. Clara remembers the bomb testing, where the government did not provide safety gear or adequate information and hides information about potential damages from its employees. She, along with other army members, files a legal suit that she feels confident they will win. This story holds intertextuality with the Transchemical Corporation in The Salt Eaters which exports toxic waste through the Black community to be disposed of illegally and tests the workers monthly but won’t let them have access to their records. Honey works at a community center, known as Khufu¹⁴⁷ which has a healing unit. This is similar to the South East community center in The Salt Eaters where Velma is cured. Clara’s second wish is that the money from the lawsuit go to the community center not to Honey’s bourgeois, money grubbing in-

¹⁴⁶ Toni Cade Bambara, preface, Gorilla My Love.

¹⁴⁷ Bambara dedicates The Salt Eaters to “Khufu.” Khufu is also the name of the belly dance teacher, Geula Khufu in Salt Eaters who teaches the women centered dance as a way of reviving an ancient Earth mother cult. Toni Cade Bambara Salt Eaters (New York: Random House, 1980) 137.

laws. Other similarities between the story “Going Critical” and novel The Salt Eaters are the similarity between the names of Vera, the daughter in “Going Critical” and Velma in *Salt* who also has a spiritual gift. Vera’s name, which means “truth” in Latin affirms her spiritual gifts.

A subplot is that Vera is angry and unwilling to let her mother go. They cling to one another, physically while folding laundry both refusing to let go of their respective ends of the towel. Emotionally Honey is also unwilling to let mother go. She is resentful of her mother’s impending death. Clara maintains that she will be able to train Honey after her death. Clara says there is work that she can only do from the other side like Old Maid who is able to train Minnie from the spirit world. Clara refuses to be victimized by the cancer, saying that it is indicative of a new age, new beginning, a few cells trying to start up again, this corresponds with the new beginning in The Salt Eaters marked by the storm and the Spring festival and the new beginning marked by Velma’s healing when many other community members also are healed and feel that something fundamentally different has occurred, from which they cannot go back. Like Velma’s healing, “Going Critical” also gives tribute to the metaphysical potential of music. Clara leaves her body during an especially moving rendition of the star spangled banner. Fireworks become a metaphor for the next life. Clara describes them as the pulses of energy marking the comings and going of innumerable souls. She begins to pass on to the next life. Clara feels her flesh falling away, she becomes like a point of light, a point of consciousness in the dark, she begins to leave her body to be one with the universe, but her daughter draws her back, not ready to let her go.

Clara, like the French word *clair*, or clear, is most like Velma from The Salt Eaters, who has come to awareness of her powers, becoming clear but has been affected by her work with Transchemical.

THOSE BONES ARE NOT MY CHILD AS CULMINATION

In Many ways Those Bones are Not My Child is a culmination of over two decades of Bambara's work. The six-hundred page narrative blurs the parameters of essay, investigative journalism, history, epic, tragedy, satire, historical fiction, and realist fiction. It contains many of the meta-themes set out early in the chapter such as countering hegemony, accountability, and reconstructing cultural knowledge that Bambara established in other works.

Bambara is the narrator of Those Bones are Not My Child. She keeps very close observation of the case of the Atlanta Child Murders (1978-1981) through her journal, collecting newspaper clippings, and as an activist. She amasses such a large amount of information on the case that newspapers consult her for information. She is also a parent who is scared for her own twelve year old daughter in the face of this threat to the community. Bambara begins the novel in the second person as she flies into a panic when her child is late from school and she is afraid she has been kidnapped. "It's 3:23 on your mother's Day watch. And your child is no where in sight....You take off down the driveway, gathering speed. You are running down the streets of southwest Atlanta like a crazy woman. Maybe you are a crazy woman, but you'd rather embrace madness than amnesia."¹⁴⁸ The city-wide investigation has been called off because the authorities have convicted Wayne Williams on circumstantial evidence. However the parents, who have been doing their own investigation, know that the killer is still at large, because other children keep disappearing. This is why Bambara is so scared for her own daughter, who turns up safe at a community center swimming pool. Bambara was so engrossed in the missing children's case that she forgot to meet her daughter at her after-school program.

¹⁴⁸ Toni Cade Bambara, Those Bones Are Not My Child. (New York: Vintage, 1999) 3,8.

Bambara blurs the line between author and character, community worker and community member by placing herself within the story. Bambara reserves the right to empathize and not to be a neutral observer. She goes on to shift to the third person for the majority of the book, to the third person to tell the story of Zala Spencer, a fictional character whose twelve year old son Sundiata (Sonny) has been missing for a year during the period of the child murders. Bambara's position as a community member and unofficial scribe of the events enables her to fill in the blanks in the case. Bambara uncovers a complicated web of child pornography by Ku Klux Klan members with ties to city officials. Authorities do not wish to reveal this information, because they fear losing capital for the city, appearing inept, and wish to maintain power and control.

In Those Bones Are Not My Child the whole city of Atlanta becomes contested territory. When the community's children are abducted and murdered, the formerly safe communities become suspect and dangerous. The Atlanta authorities disregard the neighborhoods and their inhabitants because of their race and socio-economic status. In response to the city's unwillingness to respond appropriately to their children's murders, the parents of abducted children and concerned community members organize their own watch groups which scour the woods and patrol the blocks in efforts of reclaiming the neighborhoods. The Atlanta authorities attempt to cover up the murders in order to maintain their own authority and to preserve capital. Public scare over the murders would decrease Atlanta's popularity as a conference city. The protagonists claim technological mastery over the community in the form of high tech surveillance equipment and are able to find their child's abductor without the help of the authorities. Through illuminating the way Black community members fight to regain control of their space Bambara is also able to shed light on American

authority's racism through their dismissal of Atlanta's working class Black neighborhoods.

The theme, countering cultural hegemony, through exposing silences, surfaces in the novel as the parents fight to have their stories heard by the Atlanta authorities. The parents of the missing children are repeatedly silenced by the authorities, who reserve the right to determine who is an official victim of the serial murders. Those who are determined eligible are added to "the list." The list becomes the primary focus of both official and media attention to missing and murdered children, but it doesn't correspond with new, external evidence, but to pressure from people in power. It responds to official need for evidence of progress and to the media's need for a spectacle. This official list doesn't reflect the reality of many of the community members whose children have been killed during the time period. Because they have not been added to the list, they do not receive due attention or access to the resources that the city has allocated to investigate the murders. One of the mothers reports, "The Task Force people wouldn't talk to me because my boy wasn't on the list, so I kept asking how to get him on the list. He's from Atlanta, he was missing, then they found him under the trestle with his neck broken . So why cant' he be on the list? Maybe someone after the reward can do something. They had me so bull-dozed, I'd actually apologize for taking them away from the 'real' case to listen to me. Can you imagine?"¹⁴⁹ The list reflects the city's efforts at maintaining power and control over the investigation and not the reality of many parents with missing or murdered children.

The role that the list plays in silencing the community is well articulated by Carol Anne Taylor in "Postmodern Disconnection and the Archive of Bones: Toni Cade Bambara's last work." She writes that Those Bones Are Not My Child

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 8.

appropriates lists and archives for an emancipatory purpose and places in dialogue the “authenticating stories of central characters and the contaminated stories of officialdom.”¹⁵⁰ She points to the way in which Zala and her husband Spence have generated and follow their own exhaustive lists in the book as a way of countering the Atlanta Task Force’s attempts to only search for the murdered children who fit “the pattern” of their investigation’s focus. The parents formulate their own list, Zala and Spence follow every lead, organize, and protest against the dismissive treatment by the officials. The parents find themselves in a cycle of being overwhelmed, falling apart, and then working with renewed energy in attempts to force what they know into a coherent story. When the parents challenge the list they are given lie detector tests, being all-out accused of having killed their children. Taylor goes on to examine the ways in which the parents try to make an archive that will help them form connections among the multiple murders. The parents’ archive contains information excluded or missing in the official archives because they sift and catalogue evidence themselves. When they begin to make connections and find evidence for a story that threatens power by implicating the city for negligence and connections to hate groups the city quickly finds Wayne Williams as a scapegoat for the murders.

Those Bones are Not My Child, centers around issues of accountability by giving voice to the parents’ struggles for justice and their findings. It exposes the racist nature of the American justice system that seeks at all turns to silence them in order to protect itself.

The title Those Bones are Not My Child underlines issues of accountability. The reference to bones points to the personal narrative of the mothers whose children are missing and the inept investigation of the children’s murders. Zala had rehearsed

¹⁵⁰ Carol Anne Taylor in “Postmodern disconnection and the archive of bones: Toni Cade Bambara’s last work,” Novel 35:2/3 (2002): 2

the words, “those bones are not my child,” in preparation for confronting her son’s corpse like the other parents who were forced to claim the bodies of their mutilated children. But when she sees her son, missing for over a year and presumed to be dead, she does not recognize him because his captors have abused him so badly. She tells the officials “That is not my boy.”¹⁵¹ Sonny was found battered and traumatized, wandering on a highway, beaten beyond her recognition. He is, however, in shock and unable to tell his parents who his captors are.

Another allusion to bones is when Zala and other parents try to get the experts to consider their children while they handle bones on a steel tray. A janitor tells the parents that the investigative team is only using the medical charts of persons on the task force list. The team then does their own investigation and identifies by the process of elimination the bones the investigators scrambled, several having been placed in bags together or left behind. Through their own handling of bones the parents find out how poor the investigation is for those who are not on the list. Zala’s repeated confrontation with the City of Atlanta’s lack of respect, care, for the Black children’s case alters her gradually through the course of the novel.

Zala is transformed as a result of her activism. In this way she is similar to Virginia in “The Organizer’s Wife,” who evolves through her participation in a local campaign. When Sonny first disappears, she is frantic and disorganized. She goes along with the system’s bureaucracy. She becomes transformed, however, into a clear thinker, who is able to make national connections in the case and question the power structure. When she begins to make connections between the children’s disappearances with the authorities and hate groups she evolves. “Zala did nothing in the daytime to correct the story with the facts she knew; but at night, ...she noted every scrap of information she could get.. because it mattered. Because she was no

¹⁵¹ Toni Cade Bambara, Those Bones are Not My Child 517.

longer a good little schoolgirl raising her hand to recite the Plymouth Rock Covenant.”

¹⁵²Zala’s empowerment involves collecting information that counters the dominant narrative. The act of doing research places her at odds with the power structure, which requires regurgitation of the story of domination, represented in the protagonist’s rejections of the Plymouth Rock Covenant.

When Sonny is found, the family dedicates all of their energy to healing, moving away from Atlanta for a time to Zala’s mother, Mama Lovey’s house in the country. Zala rejects all “professional” attempts to coerce Sonny’s story out of him by media and health professionals. It is obvious that he has been raped and the depth of his internalization of these deeds is manifested externally in the continual dirtiness that marks the bathtub after he bathes. The family instead heals as a result of Mama Lovey’s care (reminiscent of Minnie Ransom, the healer in *Salt Eaters*). It is her concern and spiritual working that helps to counter Sonny’s trauma and reunite the family. At first Sonny does not speak, he is sneaky, furtive, and has reverted to childish behavior. When Sonny attempts to run away, his grandmother threatens him spiritually, saying that she will haunt him the rest of his life if he hurts his parents by running away. His first words reflect shame at his abductor’s come-ons and that he did not escape, and that they made him feel complicit with dirty stories. He also lies, saying that he was kidnapped by a White couple in order to distract his parents from his real abductors whom he protects out of fear and trauma.

When the family returns home the parents continue their activism and try to patch together their lives. Meanwhile Wayne Williams is being prosecuted for the crimes. Zala speaks to a group of parents and other community activists at a meeting to protest the Williams trial. She demands that they continue their own investigation despite the bogus arrest. Zala demands that the parents be accountable to their

¹⁵² Ibid 363.

children. In her speech Zala says “Our son was stolen from us and from you and from the streets of our neighborhoods...Worse happened to others. Death happened to others. Because we allow it. We allow ourselves to be manipulated...coerced silence is terrorism.”¹⁵³ Here Zala establishes the communal responsibility for the children and the investigation and establishes alternative investigations as an act of resistance.

When Sonny returns home to Atlanta his parents find that he has been sneaking out of the house, wandering around the neighborhood. They think he has been returning to his abusers’ house. Sonny’s father Spence finds the house through using a high tech video-disc of the area that Sonny has been disappearing into. Zala and Spence make their move on the house where Sonny had been held. Zala only reveals one victimizer’s name that is familiar and the other is a voice that is not named. The familiar name belongs to the landlord whom Sonny aided in sealing up the closet with access to the roof that contains bones on the roof that Sonny explains away as chicken bones. The book closes open-ended. “Another voice form deep inside the house made Zala take the steps two at a time. It took both dogs to slow her down.”¹⁵⁴

The book’s ending is important because it affirms the activism of the parents who found Sonny’s abductors through their own set of lists, contacts, investigations, and archives. They have held themselves accountable for the children in the neighborhood by following-up on their own investigation. The open-ended nature of the closing points to the unresolved aspect of the case. The silences at the novel’s close indicate the unknowns in the case: the still-unexplored rings of hate groups, militias, child pornographers as well as the complicity of the Atlanta authorities in not investigating them. The inconclusive ending places the emphasis not on the

¹⁵³ Ibid 660-661.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid 664

perpetrators of the crime as much as the collective action of the community members who solved it and acted together.

In the epilogue Bambara once again reverts to the second person. Bambara is attempting to end the novel and move on with her life and establish some sense of normalcy and become a regular parent again. Her child chides her about being out of touch with reality and neglectful.¹⁵⁵ “You’re at the keyboard trying to answer a letter..... Her friend on the porch asks how the project is going. With so many fangs in your mouth, a normal-toned answer is not easy. Your daughter, the soul of tried patience, warns you to get done with the project, eight years, enough is enough.”¹⁵⁶ She decides to send a friend the materials she has collected about the murders. This provides the opportunity to list the other materials on the Atlanta murders. She then traces the events following the Williams conviction including holes in the conviction, unused evidence, and ties of the murder to the Klan that the authorities knew about.

¹⁵⁷

The bracketing use of the second person combined with Zala’s call for accountability rounds out not only this novel but all of Bambara’s works. This combination of reader, activist, writer and community member resolves the tension between organizer and community that she repeatedly tries to solve in “The War of the Wall,” “Playing with Punjab,” “The Apprentice,” and “The Organizer’s Wife,” and The Salt Eaters. This narrative device also counters the false dichotomy, insider-outsider relationship between the reader and the activist by holding the reader accountable to act on the atrocities being committed. Like Zala’s speech it implicates the reader as a part of the problem, if he or she is not being a part of the solution.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid 665.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid 665.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid 668.

Bambara continues the theme of centering community and providing voice to working class Black people in her own film work. Chapter four: Producing “Image Weapons,” *Serving the Community through Documentary Film*, will critically engage the film projects that Bambara took part in, rooting these pieces in issues of accountability and reconstructing historical memory.

Chapter Four

Producing “Image Weapons,” Serving the Community through Documentary Film

What is noticeable to me about my current writing is the stretch out toward the future. I’m not interested in reworking memories and playing with flashbacks. I’m trying to press the English language particularly verb tenses and modes, to accommodate flash-forwards and potential happenings. I get more and more impatient, though with verbal language, print conventions, literary protocol and the like; I’m much more interested in filmmaking.¹⁵⁸

In the latter part of her life Bambara turned her energies almost solely to film. She reports that her interest in cinema started early. When she was growing up in the 1930’s Harlem had no fewer than five cinemas. These cinemas often showed short films between the features that she felt were both racist in nature and poor in quality. Her awareness of racism in film began with these shorts, which also sowed the seeds for her calling as a screen writer, the inspiration she drew from her childhood drive to rewrite “the awful shorts at the Apollo.”¹⁵⁹ Bambara’s interest in social change was contained by her writing only until the 1980’s. After writing the manuscript for Those Bones Are Not My Child she decided to be more extroverted in her work, writing that she no longer had the patience to “sit it out in the solitude of my back room, all by my lonesome self, knocking out books.”¹⁶⁰ Her main interest had turned to making films—being “much more at home with a crew swapping insights, brilliances, pooling

¹⁵⁸ Claudia Tate, “Toni Cade Bambara,” Black women Writers at Work, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1985) 25.

¹⁵⁹ Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations ed. Toni Morrison (New York: First Vintage contemporaries edition, 1999) 225.

¹⁶⁰ Onesto Li “In Memory, Toni Cade Bambara: Passing on the story,” The Black Scholar 26 (1996): 7.

resources, information.”¹⁶¹ Bambara found a place to explore film from a social change vantage point at the Scribe Video Center in Philadelphia where she worked with Louis Massiah, founder and director. Scribe Video: a non-profit organization dedicated to providing the community training in Independent filmmaking practices. She worked at Scribe from 1986 until 1995 as filmmaker, critic, script writer and teacher. As both film critic and teacher she deconstructed mainstream film as a tool of Eurocentrism and stressed the importance of movies that dispel Hollywood stereotypes about Black people.

I go to see [Hollywood Films] to train myself in film, to look at what are the conventional practices, and what do they mean ideologically or politically... I stress the importance of Independent films that do not take the “Hollyweird” model as protocol, but rather as they are striking out for something else, for a socially responsible cinema.¹⁶²

She also drew inspiration from the cinematic goals articulated by the student rebellion at the film school at UCLA (1969-1973). Recognizing film as a site of struggle, the students overturned the film school’s curriculum and demanded that it meet their priorities, which were to be accountable to the community, that the community, not the classroom, be the training ground. They declared that they were concerned with the destiny of their people, not self-indulgent assignments, and they wanted to reconstruct cultural memory, not slavishly imitate White models, and they wanted access to world film.¹⁶³ Like the imperatives of the UCLA film students and the tenets of Third Cinema the films Bambara worked on emphasize the need for accountability, countering silences and reconstructing cultural memory.

¹⁶¹ Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions 7.

¹⁶² Ibid 7.

¹⁶³ Toni Cade Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations 91.

Third Cinema

The concept, inspired by Italian neo-realism and the idea of the social documentary, was first launched in the 1960s in Latin America by filmmakers who constructed their film as the artistic arm of the Marxist revolutionary struggles that marked much of Latin America, Africa and Asia at the time. Many of these regions were embroiled in struggles for independence either from colonization, dictators, or fascist regimes.¹⁶⁴ Third Cinema was inspired by the pedagogical theories of Paulo Freire and Frantz Fanon, two theorists who Bambara writes were pivotal to her becoming a revolutionary storyteller.¹⁶⁵ As a genre it is marked by its opposition and fundamental difference from “First Cinema,” which is identified with Hollywood practices and imitators. Third cinema also maintains its difference from “Second Cinema,” or film produced by indigenous filmmakers that does not challenge hegemony. Bambara differentiates between film dedicated to social change versus film simply made by indigenous creators in her critique of Spike Lee’s film School Daze in Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions, where she claims that Lee films are largely Black versions of Hollywood movies. Through examining his misogynistic and homophobic tendencies she both illuminates and eradicates the myth that just because Lee is Black and his films nationalistic aesthetically, this does not mean that his work is revolutionary.¹⁶⁶ Third cinema defines itself as a tool for “creating a revolutionary consciousness for the mass mobilization of society for social change.”¹⁶⁷ Two of the pioneers of Third Cinema, Argentinean filmmakers, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino felt that the arts had huge potential to move people towards consciousness and were a powerful tool for revolution. They put forth the mission of

¹⁶⁴ Femi Okiremuete Shaka, Modernity and the African Cinema: a study in colonial discourse, postcoloniality, and modern African identities. (Trenton, New Jersey, Africa World Press, 2004) 237.

¹⁶⁵ Bambara, Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions 250.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid 198.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid 78.

Third Cinema, as they saw it, in their key theoretical essay “Towards a Third Cinema:”

The anti-imperialist struggle of the peoples of the Third World and of their equivalents inside imperialist countries is the axis of the world revolution. Third cinema is the cinema that recognizes in that struggle, the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifestation of our time, and the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality with each people as the starting point... the decolonization of culture.¹⁶⁸

Solanas and Getino saw their film work as guerrilla cinema and the camera as the creator of “image-weapons.”¹⁶⁹ Their goal was to create critical awareness and revolutionary fervor among the masses. The theorists also emphasized the need to privilege cognition over emotionality in cinema. Willemen, co-editor of Questions of Third Cinema, explains this drive as an attempt at “reversing the hierarchy between the cognitive and emotive” as put in place by Hollywood, which “orchestrates emotionality while deliberately atrophying the desire for understanding and intellectuality.”¹⁷⁰

Teshome Gabriel claims that Third films emphasizes space over time. Gabriel traces this trend to cultural traditions where communication is slow-paced and time moves slowly. Whereas in Western culture much value is placed on time, which lends itself to sayings such as “time is money,” he argues that some of the cinematic codes which are applied differently in the two cinematic traditions are the long take, cross cutting, the close-up, the panning shot, the concept of hero and the concept of silence. In Third World films, the slow leisurely pacing approximates the characters’ sense of

¹⁶⁸ Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema” in: *Movies and Methods. An Anthology*, ed Bill Nichols, (Phoenix: University of Arizona Press 1976) 18.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid 24.

¹⁷⁰ Paul Willemen, “the Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections,” Eds. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: BFI) 13.

time and rhythm of life. The high frequency of wide-angle shots represents a sense of community and the relationship between people and nature. Panning shots help maintain integrity of space and time and convey a different concept of time which is not linear or chronological but co-exists within it.¹⁷¹ This view on space corresponds with Bambara's view on Sembene Ousmane's work, which uses long shots and wide ranges of space as a way of privileging the community, ancestry, and space as contested ground with Europeans. Bambara juxtaposes this more open concept of space with mainstream techniques which hide space and instead primarily use tight shots which emphasize individuality.¹⁷²

Bambara's film work includes Midnight Ramble: The Story of the Black Film Industry (1984), directed by Bestor Cramm and Pearl Bowser. In this film she serves as writer and commentator of this work about Oscar Micheaux one of the pioneers of Black film. Bambara's segment of the film emphasizes Micheaux's sense of accountability to the Black community, questioning racism and place as a role model for other filmmakers. For Louis Massiah's The Bombing of Osage Avenue (1986) Bambara wrote the screen play documenting the effects of the 1985 massacre of eleven members of the controversial Black Nationalist organization MOVE in Philadelphia. Bambara's presentation of the events emphasizes the effect of the violent attack on the safety and sanctity of the community, not just the injustice done to the Black organization. More Than Property (1993) A film that Toni Cade Bambara facilitated and edited while at the Scribe Video Center, is a documentary about the United Hands Community Land Trust, an organization in Philadelphia that helps low income people to purchase housing. The film uses long shots of city scenes, montages of every day people, interviews, and celebrations to emphasize the centrality of

¹⁷¹ Teshome Gabriel Third World Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press) 367.

¹⁷² Ibid 144.

community in people's lives. In Bambara's final film project, W.E.B. DuBois, A Biography in Four Voices (1995) she serves as writer and commentator of one segment of DuBois's life. Her examination of DuBois' life and activities in the 1930's emphasizes his sense of accountability to Black people both nationally and internationally through his involvement in the Pan African council and the United Nations, along with his commitment as a scholar activist as a professor at Atlanta University who emphasized scholar activism to his students.

I. Accountability

Bambara used film to address the issue of accountability in her segment on Oscar Micheaux, of the film Midnight Ramble: The Story of the Black Film Industry (1984). In the film she points out the ways in which Micheaux used film as a way to put forth a positive image of Blacks. Micheaux's portrayal of Black people was in direct opposition to mainstream film practices which reappropriated race films. When Hollywood directors realized that race films were making money they began to appropriate the Black image, often manipulating the content to fulfill Whites' perception of Blacks. Oscar Micheaux, on the other hand, used film as a way of both questioning stereotypes of Black in mainstream films and positing and affirming images in their place.

Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951) was the first man to produce a full-length, all-Black movie. In 1918 he produced, Homesteader via the Micheaux Film Corporation, which he founded and presided over. He was also the first Black man to write a best-selling novel, The Case of Mrs. Wingate, which he also published, distributed, and promoted. Micheaux is credited with producing forty-four of the eighty-two all-Black pictures made from 1918 to 1951. His last movie, The Betrayal, based on one of his best selling novels, The Winds From Nowhere, was released a year before his death.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ "Oscar Micheaux." Encyclopedia Britannica. 2006.

As commentator in Midnight Ramble Bambara's analysis elucidates several issues of social justice in Oscar Micheaux's works. Her observations highlight in Micheaux's films his attempt to give voice to Black people's experiences, his struggle to control Black images, his use of film to signify on racist film practices, and his use of film as a means of correcting the historical record. Bambara's comments highlight the history and need for Black people's self-determination, the importance of role models in the film industry, and the negative effects of appropriation.

Toni Cade Bambara is the first voice in Midnight Ramble. She contextualizes Oscar Micheaux's career, locating it historically in a time when Black people, hungry for their own image a generation after slavery, were finally able to afford to produce it. The great migration north gave Blacks greater access to capital and led to growing middle class lives and values. The following comments record Micheaux's belief in the powerful role of race movies to counteract stereotypes and the need for Blacks to own the means of production.

I'm tired of reading about the Negro in an inferior position in society. I want to see them in dignified roles...Also, I want to see the white man and the white woman as the villains...I want to see the Negro pictured in books just like he lives... But if you write that way, the white book publishers won't publish your scripts...so I formed my own book publishing firm and write my own books, and Negroes like them, too, because three of them are best sellers.¹⁷⁴

Micheaux's work also counteracted the stereotypical portrayal of Blacks in mainstream films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).¹⁷⁵ Bambara talks about the

¹⁷⁴ Midnight Ramble: The Story of the Black Film Industry. Dir. Bestor Cramm and Pearl Bowser. WGBH, 1984.

¹⁷⁵ *The Birth of a Nation*. Dir. D.W. Griffith. Image Entertainment, 1915.

genesis of the film and Black people's rebellion to it. Although President Woodrow Wilson endorsed the film and nationwide pageants and plays welcomed its arrival Blacks still widely protested. Black people responded with marches and rallies and petitioned government officials to ban the movie. The following year several race movie companies began in response. Bambara goes on to posit Micheaux as a model for independent filmmakers. He had a great deal of film making skill and was able to produce films for very little money. Micheaux, extremely charismatic and persuasive, was an excellent promoter for his films.

Bambara notes that with the Depression Black people lost control of race movies and Hollywood begins to control Black film and with it, Black images. With the exception of Micheaux's, race movies all but die out because Blacks could not afford to make them. Hollywood realizing the commercial value of the films began to produce their own brand of race movies emphasizing stereotypes of Blacks as subservient butlers and "mammies." In response, Black filmmakers began to duplicate the entertainment value of Hollywood films and the difference between race movies and Hollywood films becomes moot. Bambara claimed that the race movies went backward. The films stopped doing their job, which was to provide an alternative, realistic, affirming image of Black people.

Bambara continues to highlight the issue of accountability in the film W.E.B. Du Bois, A Biography in Four Voices (1995). The life of W.E.B. Du Bois, one of Bambara's role models, epitomized the engaged scholar. Bambara introduces the film crediting Du Bois's confidence and fearlessness for shaping her as a scholar-activist. Her contribution to the film emphasizes Du Bois' fierce sense of accountability to the Black community both in the United States and throughout the Pan-African world.

The film W.E.B. Du Bois, A Biography in Four Voices is a documentary that examines Dr. Du Bois' leadership of key political movements involving Blacks. It is structured as a collection of four chronological documentary shorts, each section written and narrated by a writer. Wesley Brown writes and narrates Section One (1895 to 1915) including the development of the Niagara Movement and the birth of the N.A.A.C.P.; Thulani Davis creates Section Two (1919 to 1929), the era of the Pan-African Congresses and the cultural movements of the Harlem Renaissance; Toni Cade Bambara in Section Three (1934-1948) looks at economic cooperatives and Depression era efforts for social reform; and Amiri Baraka in Section Four (1949-1963) addresses the anti-colonial struggles and the rebuilding of Africa.

Bambara focuses on Du Bois's growing radicalism in the 1930s. During this time he concentrated on Black people's economic self-determination, continuing to build the Talented Tenth on the national level, Pan-Africanism, and pushing for Black liberation on an international level. Bambara's commentary highlights the N.A.A.C.P.'s turn toward a conservative agenda, which led them to abandon Du Bois, whose politics they feared would alienate the American government. The leaders of the N.A.A.C.P. thought that by adopting a conservative agenda they would not offend the government, and thus insure the long term viability of the organization during the Red Scare. At the time Du Bois was urging the organization to be accountable to the masses of Black people who were not being served by the dominant American political groups. Bambara's analysis of Du Bois' leadership also emphasizes action. She highlights the way in which Du Bois translated his academic work into a platform for political action on the national and international levels.

Bambara narrates that Du Bois viewed the 1930s as a potential new Reconstruction, a time that could offer the country the opportunity for a complete revolution. Du Bois's growing radicalism resulted in his push for the N.A.A.C.P. to

respond to the needs of working class Black people during the Depression. He increasingly emphasized economic self determination such as self-help ventures, consumer cooperation, savings plans. The N.A.A.C.P.'s refusal led to a widening gulf between him and the organization he helped found. Du Bois had been using the N.A.A.C.P. magazine The Crisis to criticize the organization. When it was no longer financially solvent, editorship of The Crisis was taken over by N.A.A.C.P. and they asked for his resignation. In 1944 the N.A.A.C.P. invited Presidential Candidate Harry Truman to speak at their annual conference. Du Bois was openly critical of this because of some of Truman's political choices such as dropping the atomic bomb and his support of European countries over the colonies. Defying the N.A.A.C.P. nonpartisan policy Du Bois backed Henry Wallace, a Progressive, for the 1948 Presidential election. As a result of his political sentiments he was once again asked to resign. Though the organization survived the Cold War era to go on and win landmark cases such as "Brown vs. Board of Education" (1954) they did so at the expense of alienating their founding members and not responding to the immediate needs of Black people .

Bambara's segment of the film goes on to examine DuBois' career after his resignation from the N.A.A.C.P. She highlights his priority as a scholar activist to encourage accountability with his students, his international campaigns, and his attempts at coalition building amongst different Africana communities. In 1934 after Du Bois' break from the N.A.A.C.P. he accepted an offer to teach at Atlanta University. He directed his energies toward teaching social responsibility, building coalitions, and compiling resources on Black peoples. In the classroom Dr.DuBois emphasizes black intellectual self determination, responsibility to the race, and the necessity of agitation around issues that effect Black people. As a scholar activist his classes explored one issue of importance to Black people each year. They then

produced a volume of research on these topics, which spanned issues such as Black people's history and relationship with Reconstruction, Marxist theory, education and economics. During this time he also started the Phylon Journal of Race and Culture, dedicated to exploring issues of importance to Black peoples. He tried to organize the presidents of the seventeen Negro land grant colleges to form an academic cooperative, but the coalition did not survive.

It was also during this time that Du Bois really began to push for accountability and coalition building on an international level. In 1944 he acted as consultant to the United States delegation to the United Nations in hopes of convincing the U.N. to take a stance on colonialism. DuBois tried to make international connections to plead the case of the Negro, because he knew that the American government would not do it. He also chaired the 5th Pan African Congress (1945), where the group continued to discuss building power for African nations and fighting colonialism as a unified African Diaspora. His emphasis on Pan-Africanism represented the drive to create alliances to fight for mutual liberation. Du Bois felt that Black people could not be successful in our strivings for liberation unless they were tied to the greater cause for African liberation. This stance is of exceptional importance because it speaks to a belief in the power and autonomy to African peoples.¹⁷⁶

Bambara highlights Du Bois's model of unity of theory and practice. As a scholar he dedicated his research and his life to the uplift of all Black people. He wrote several books with Black people's advancement as the subject and attempted to grow a next generation of academics to follow in his path. He maintained a faith in generating solutions to the issues facing poor Blacks that lay outside the status quo

¹⁷⁶ W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography in Three Voices, dir Louis Massiah. California News Reel. 1995.

despite the N.A.A.C.P.'s lack of support. Du Bois however did not stop at formulating plans; he also acted, traveling the globe in efforts to enact solutions.

More Than Property (1993) a film by The Community Land Trust is a short film, for which Bambara served as facilitator, editor, and commentator while at Scribe Video.¹⁷⁷ The fifteen-minute-long film is a documentary of the Community Land Trust organization in Philadelphia, which helps poor people to purchase homes. Like Third Cinema films that provide long shots of the environment, conversation as a way of privileging space as contested area, and personal connections as paramount most of More Than Property features footage of Philadelphia, community members, and interviews families who received homes through the program. Though the neighborhoods are run down and neglected, the film does not play up pathology. Instead, it gives primacy to family, cooperation, and accountability, both of the community organization's holding banks accountable for giving them home loans and the community members being accountable to one another by helping to rehabilitate the houses and to create a safe community for their families.

The film begins with shots of everyday people going about life: a family leaves their house to start the day, another family waves from the stoop, children play, people smile from inside a house. The camera enters a home which is typical of many in working class neighborhoods that feature plastic covers on furniture, in order to protect a working person's investment from the wear and tear of children's play. The film claims an interiority of perspective. The community people smile and wave at the camera, they embrace the documenter like another community member. The outsider versus insider relationship between documenter and subject is minimized. In the

¹⁷⁷ More than Property produced by the United Hands Community Land Trust, Scribe Video Center, 1993.

background an amateur saxophonist provides the sound track, again reinforcing community connections by utilizing a local artist.

For the first time one voice rises above a din of conversation, it is Toni Cade Bambara who says “It’s nice to own one’s own house.” The camera then enters a backyard, a characteristic of a house which typically sits on a plot of land, allowing exterior as well as interior space by comparison with cramped apartments. The film associates owning one’s own home with freedom of expressing culture. In these shots people speak Spanish, and music is playing with Spanish lyrics. In response to Bambara’s questions a man tells the story of his need for his own house. He tells the story of his previous living arrangements in a dangerous neighborhood where his children were at risk from asbestos poisoning, gang shootings, and a car that literally ran through his front wall during a car chase. Now the camera cuts to more stereotypical shots of the ghetto, with graffiti and garbage on the streets to reinforce the danger to the man’s family. The film then shows the Community Land Trust Program in action. He explains the Sweat Equity Program where people work together to rehabilitate abandoned houses and receive the repaired houses for their collective work.

As a commentator Bambara explains the politics of neglect by the banks and the city of Philadelphia. She points out the large number of both homeless families and abandoned houses in Philadelphia. She speaks of banks that make money off of poor people but must be continually held accountable for meeting the tenants of the Community Reinvestment Act, in which banks must help to combat redlining through providing low interest loans to poor people. She defines the communal ownership of land as a way of poor people creating change and taking power. The film now shows a more colorful, empowered neighborhood to reinforce the beauty that can happen when people feel ownership over their community. There are colorful murals and fruit

sellers' stands. People clear and empty lots of debris. A child who is helping with the clean-up says that he wants a place to play where there are no drug dealers. Later there is baseball game taking place on the lot with an elder woman as an outfielder, which reinforces the multi-generational nature of community action.

The film's ending returns to the man who was interviewed in the beginning, thus framing the film. His house is now complete. His wife cooks at the stove. He speaks of a renewed sense of security as a result of home ownership. A community initiative has driven drug dealers out of the neighborhood. His daughters, who couldn't play outside because it was too dangerous, now have a yard to play in. The six young girls, who previously had to all sleep together, now have more space. The wife then tells her perspective in Spanish with no translation. The absence of translation speaks of the right of Spanish speaking people to speak unmitigated to their own community without conversion to English. The use of Spanish also speaks to Bambara's essay in Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions on the denial of mother tongue as one of the popular reasons that many Third filmmakers entered their craft. The filmmakers sought to fight for the legitimization of their language, a vital part of culture and identity. More Than Property also resists English as the dominant and universal language. The film's prevalence of Spanish speaking people reinforces the need for coalition building between poor people. Bambara introduced this theme in The Salt Eaters with The Seven Sisters theater troupe³, with this multicultural group touring the country performing activist plays and songs. In her introduction to This Bridge Called by Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color¹⁷⁸, Bambara advocates these types of coalitions as a powerful way of fighting oppression. More Than

¹⁷⁸ Toni Cade Bambara, foreword, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (New York, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981) vii.

Property shows poor Black and Latino families struggling together for equal housing. This intercultural cooperation seeks to challenge the manufactured divide-and-conquer tactics that those in power try to use to separate oppressed people on the basis of superficial differences.¹⁷⁹ Bambara recognizes this theme in The Black Woman when she examines how Black men's oppression of Black women feeds European patriarchy and weakens the overall Black movement for liberation. She also alludes to the issue of unwitting allies in her commentary in the film on W.E.B. Du Bois, when she illuminates the ways in which the N.A.A.C.P.'s rejection of Du Bois in order to avoid government suspicion weakened their commitment to working class Black people.

More Than Property ends with the family's participation in the community's Halloween party. The party highlights the family's new sense of safety and connection as a result of involvement in the community organization and ownership of their own property.

In spite of its brevity, this film is important because the cinematography supports not only the film's main goals but many of Bambara's own in her turn to film as a way of fighting cultural hegemony. The documentary's centering of everyday people, the prevalence of long shots of neighborhoods, the use of community people's words and perspectives and especially the emphasis on people's self determination and holding one another accountable for bettering their communities, all make the film a powerful tool for social change.

II. Reconstructing Cultural Memory

Toni Cade Bambara wrote the screenplay and narrated Louis Massiah's The Bombing of Osage Avenue (1986) a film documenting the murders of eleven members of the Black political group MOVE on May 13, 1985 by the city of Philadelphia.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ The Bombing of Osage Avenue, dir. Louis Massiah, ScribeVideo Center. 1986.

The winner of the Best Documentary Academy Award, this film operates as a tool of social change both by placing the massacre within a historical framework and by presenting the events from the perspective of community members and leaders. As the title suggests, the film emphasizes the damage to community rather than focusing solely on the political group. It serves as a powerful way of reconstructing historical memory because it seeks to amend the historical record by inserting the observations of neighborhood residents and juxtaposing the people's own memory of the events onto the presentation by the dominant media. By giving voice to the inhabitants of Osage Avenue, the film counters their silencing by the mainstream media and reconstructs the event from a people-centered, subjective, standpoint.

The film begins with a political history of Philadelphia. The city's racist past shaped the political climate and paved the way for widespread community displacement characterized by the MOVE massacre. The historic perspective locates the mass displacement of people in Philadelphia as beginning with Native Americans. The Algonquin people had originally inhabited the land, were subsequently displaced by invading Whites who later brought captive Africans. The film then looks specifically at the history of Cobbs Creek, the neighborhood that houses Osage Avenue. From the 1830s through the 1850s Cobbs Creek was often immersed in violent riots over political, racial, or labor issues. When Pennsylvania Hall, a convention center built by abolitionists, was set on fire a day after its dedication ceremony, the fire department watched the building burn without making a move to put out the fire. This neglect would be replicated in the Osage Avenue bombing. Bambara then expands her gaze beyond Philadelphia to look at the 1921 Greenwood, Oklahoma, race riot which ended in upwards of 300 Black people murdered and a whole community destroyed: state-sponsored genocide. She goes on to review the history of the neighborhood first as home to Europeans who rented homes while

working in factories. The community shifts to a home owning community of Black people. Cobbs Creek becomes a type of middle class haven to Black people beginning in the 1930s. Several community members recount the heyday of the community as having a thriving economic and social life.

The second feature of The Bombing of Osage Avenue which marks it as a tool of social change is Bambara's choice to have the story told by community members. Giving voice to community members affirms Black people's knowledge but also complicates the story by not allowing an easy leftist one-sided pro-MOVE anti-government reading of the events. Elders in a Cobb's Creek nursing home retell the history of the community. The use of older people as historians affirms their wisdom and contribution. This decision also stakes a claim for Black people as historical recorders as "griots" as opposed to exclusive reliance on the written historical record, which many times silences Blacks. The story of the MOVE massacre and events leading up to it is told by several community leaders and neighborhood people. Interestingly, most of the accounts are of the psychological abuse many of the neighbors felt they faced as the result of the MOVE community. They accuse the MOVE members of filling the neighborhood with rotten odors from compost heaps and improperly disposed trash, dog waste, spreading roaches, and noise disturbance. Many of the neighbors expressed sympathy with MOVE's political ideas but when they began blasting their message, liberally mixed with curse words over bullhorns for hours at a time they began to complain to government officials. They, however, did not intend for city officials to hose, riddle the house with tens of thousands of bullets, bomb the house, then shoot at those who sought to leave the burning building. Meanwhile firefighters stood by for an hour while the house burned and the spreading flames engulfed the entire neighborhood, leaving sixty-one houses destroyed and two hundred sixty people homeless.

Bambara's choice to situate the film historically and base the film on community members' stories emphasizes the Black community's views. Her choice shifts the emphasis of the story from the question of whether the MOVE group was right or wrong to the continual broken contracts between the Black community and local government officials. The privileging of the neighborhood's voices enables a larger story to be heard of community displacement and official betrayal of the people's trust. The residents of Cobb's Creek called city officials in efforts to secure their middle class neighborhood from what they thought of as an intra-neighborhood threat and the end result was a destruction of their own homes by their supposed rescuers, led by Philadelphia's first Black Mayor. Through this film Bambara beseeches Black people to know who their true enemies are.

Midnight Ramble continues the theme of reconstructing historical memory. In this film Bambara gives critical commentary on Micheaux's most controversial piece "Within our Gates" which tells the story of a lynching from a Black point of view. The film was released in 1919, the year of the Red Summer where race riots took place in fifteen cities. Theater owners either suppressed the film or censored the lynching scene because they feared the film would agitate the already festering racial problems. Bambara adds that the film was especially significant because it involved a rape scene of a Black woman by a White man. This scene is in direct protest and challenge to the rape scene in "The Birth of a Nation" where a Black man, ostensibly, unable to control his primal urges, rapes a White woman. The White man's victim is his illegitimate daughter. The man's attempted incest highlights White men's ostensible uncontrollable lust toward Black women which led him not only to violate the woman's mother but his daughter as well. This rape scene also highlights the racism/sexism nexus which has made Black women vulnerable to sexual violence by White men.

Bambara's potential in film work was cut short by her death at the age of fifty-six, in 1995. Her priorities in film were largely reflective of the concerns in her fiction: countering hegemony, insisting on accountability, and reconstructing historical memory. She also fulfilled many of the goals of the Independent film movements such as centering working class people's struggle and showing people overcoming obstacles. The short span of her work in film however barely allowed her to scratch the surface of some of her other film goals such as "accommodating flash-forwards and potential happenings" as she stated in a 1985 interview with Claudia Tate.¹⁸¹ Bambara's sense of accountability to the Black community was communicated both through an emphasis on social change and the attention she paid to painting a vivid community life complete with a range of life-like characters with faces, names, and different opinions. This commitment to community voices manifested in films such as More than Property and The Bombing of Osage Avenue, which reflect the myriad personalities and lushness of language she features in her writing. She also demonstrates a sense of accountability in her film work through paying tribute to elders such as W.E.B. DuBois and Oscar Micheaux. The theme, reconstructing historical memory, surfaces in her film work in her presentation of the MOVE massacre from the standpoint of community members in The Bombing of Osage Avenue. She met many of the goals she set out in her role as a cultural worker who used arts as an outlet such as highlighting struggle and overcoming oppression. Both her fiction and film explores contemporary social issues such as the MOVE murders in the "The Bombing of Osage Avenue" and the Atlanta child murders in Those Bones are Not My Child. Bambara's film work showed incredible promise in providing a platform for community members' voices and significant societal commentary. It is to

¹⁸¹ Claudia Tate, "Toni Cade Bambara," Black women Writers at Work 25.

the detriment of everyone in pursuit of justice that her life ended with future work not realized.

Conclusion

The Call To Action

America's racial, political, gendered, and economic wars undergird much of Toni Cade Bambara's writer-activism.¹⁸² She viewed her role in these wars as a cultural worker whose chosen front was writing. Bambara explains that she does not think of herself as a writer; she thinks of herself as a community person who writes.¹⁸³ Her goal was to help arm the Black community with tools for the struggle... She wrote in her introduction to The Black Woman: An Anthology (1970) "We are involved in a struggle for liberation. Our art is no longer to entertain or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy. It is instead invested in touching and unifying."¹⁸⁴ Bambara's fiction directly counters hegemony by giving voice to everyday Black folks. She finds activist literature essential to the struggle against hegemony, writing: "That is what I work to do: to produce stories that save our lives...I write stories in which we are the subjects, we are the hero of the tales."¹⁸⁵ Hegemony relies on silencing and distorting information. Bambara's essays center on not only unearthing oppressed voices but mending ruptures within the Black community.

Toni Cade Bambara dedicated her works to overcoming the many rifts amongst Black peoples in order to build a stronger community both for the spiritual, artistic, and political as well as the activist and the community. This is best

¹⁸² Toni Cade Bambara. Black Women Writers (1950) A Critical Evaluation edited by Mari Evans Anchor New York: Books Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984) 12

¹⁸³ Ibid 218.

¹⁸⁴ Toni Cade Bambara, preface, The Black Woman, Toni Cade Bambara Ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1970) 7.

¹⁸⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, "Salvation Is the Issue," Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation) 41.

demonstrated in the two novels The Salt Eaters and Those Bones are Not My Child. The former explores these tensions while the latter resolves them by collapsing the boundaries between author and reader as well as activist and community member through narrative devices that feature the cyclical use of the second person. The later novel, through its focus on actual events narrows the divide between fiction and nonfiction. This work demands that the readers be accountable to issues that negatively affect the Black community.

Tracing the trajectory of Toni Cade Bambara's works, this thesis holds constant several variables such as establishing accountability, countering false binaries, and reconstructing cultural memory. I cull these meta-themes from Toni Cade Bambara's own work as a way of centering her voice and perspective as a Black woman, activist, and writer. Chapter One: The introduction has placed Toni Cade Bambara's works in context by looking at her life, the works of other Black woman writer-activists, and examines some of the criticism of her work. Nonfiction and the Struggle Against Cultural Hegemony, has placed Bambara's non-fiction work in the above mentioned themes.

Through highlighting these meta-themes in her essays on gender roles in the Black Power Movement and her film criticism, this chapter stresses the counter hegemonic thrust of her non-fiction and paves the way for a discussing these themes in her fiction work. Chapter Three: Fiction and the Struggle for Wholeness once again has focused on the ways in which these meta-themes inform her fiction work. The chapter traces the course between The Salt Eaters and Those Bones are Not My Child in order to illuminate Bambara's move toward wholeness. Chapter Three: Producing "Image Weapons," Serving the Community through Documentary Film, has scrutinized Bambara's film work in the latter chapter of her life. This chapter once again has used establishing accountability, reconstructing cultural memory, and

countering false binaries as a framework to look at Bambara's film work as an extension of a larger thrust towards self-definition and centering the Black community in her works.

Tracking Evolution in the Corpus of Bambara's Works

Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions and Those Bones are Not My Child display a shift and growth in Toni Cade Bambara's priorities from her earlier works. The stories in Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions, products of the final segment of Toni Cade Bambara's life, were assembled and edited by Toni Morrison. Many of the stories form conversation with stories and topics that she had initiated in other volumes. Many themes reoccur, such as the need to bridge the schism between the political and spiritual, the detrimental effects of environmental racism, the tender man, broken covenants with children, and tensions within the role of the community organizer. Those Bones are Not My Child resolves many of the tensions that Bambara illuminates in the rest of her works such as conflict between political, artist and spiritual; the community and the organizer; and the writer and the reader.

Bambara's early works, Gorilla My Love (1972) and The Sea Birds are Still Alive (1982) are very nationalist and strident in tone with the Black community, and specifically Black women at the center. Outside communities or outside threat is not fully described and instead the stories concentrate on illustrating unification and community as a form of protection from outside threat as opposed to legitimizing the enemy by talking about them. In later works such as The Salt Eaters, (1980) "Going Critical" from Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions (1999) and Those Bones are not My Child (1999) the enemy is given a face, name, and agenda. In both The Salt Eaters and "Going Critical" the enemy comes in the form of nuclear waste contamination which threatens both community and individual health. One of the

characteristics of nationalism is the privileging of “the struggle” over personal desires. Stories such as “The Apprentice,” “The Organizer’s Wife,” and “the Long Night,” all found in The Sea Birds are Still Alive give primacy to individual’s sacrifice for the greater common good. However The Salt Eaters, published after the dénouement of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, looks critically at the negative effects on personal health that can stem from the overwork and over-commitment of the demanding political work. Velma’s breakdown is the result of overwork and the severe displacement of personal desire.

Bambara’s later works such as “The Sea Birds are Still Alive” the Seven Sisters Collective in The Salt Eaters, and “Madame Bai and the Taking of Stone Mountain,” feature a branching out beyond the Black community. “The Sea Birds are Still Alive” takes place on a boat in Vietnam, the first and only of Bambara’s stories with a setting other than a Black community, a result of her investment in Socialist revolution and travels to Socialist countries. The international collective of women represented by the Seven Sisters Collective from The Salt Eaters also demonstrates Bambara’s widening gaze to coalition building amongst “Third World” women. “Madame Bai and the Taking of Stone Mountain” introduces a new topic for Bambara: discrimination against immigrants of color. When the story opens two of the narrator’s students are threatened by skinheads because they are from foreign countries. In typical Bambara style however, they refuse to be victims and beat up the perpetrators.

Bambara’s investment in spirituality, a topic she barely alludes to in early works despite a cryptic allusion to Great Ma Drew “working roots” in Gorilla My Love is fully expounded upon in The Salt Eaters, which is spiritual as much as it is political. Spirituality is seamlessly interwoven into “Going Critical,” from Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions and only plays a small part of Those Bones are Not

My Child in the character of Ma Lovey, an elder and a root worker, who uses her connection to her ancestors to hold the family together.

Bambara's stories also shift in their characterization of men. In her early stories, which directly follow The Black Woman, which was very critical of Black men, they are secondary characters and are most often problematic or deficient. The few strong male characters are still mediated by a female narrator. In her later works however Bambara gives men complex characterization and allows them to have their own voice. Obie in The Salt Eaters, who is recast as Louis in "Baby's Breath" from *Deep Sightings*, and Spence in *Those Bones* are warm, genuine, and supportive characters.

Limitations

Some of the limitations of this study include lack of knowledge of Bambara's works that have not been documented electronically or cited by other writers such as those that may be contained in magazines such as *The Liberator*.

Implications of her work: The Call to Action

The importance of Bambara's work lies in her call to action through literature, through using it as a tool for raising political consciousness. In a 1980 interview Kalamu Ya Salaam asked Bambara if she thought that fiction was the most effective way to bridge the gap between diverse elements in the Black community. Bambara replied emphatically that, "The most effective way to do it, is to do it!"¹⁸⁶ She went on: "I think literature has potency as a tool for transformation." Through collapsing the divide between the writer, reader, activist, and community member, Bambara holds everyone accountable for ameliorating racial, political, gender, and economic

¹⁸⁶ Kalamu ya Salaam "Searching for the Mother Tongue" First World, Vol. 2, no. 4. 1980. 51.

disparity. She viewed her role in this war as a cultural worker whose chosen front was writing. Her goal was to help arm the Black community with tools for the struggle.

Bambara's work, by highlighting issues that harm the Black community and centering Black activism, pushes for us to be awake to the matters that are sapping our communities and to unify in order to stop them. Bambara's work beseeches us to not only wake up to these dangerous issues but also to act upon them. In Those Bones Are Not My Child Bambara states that she will not "embrace amnesia." In the story, Bambara thinks this to herself as she runs through the streets of Atlanta looking for her temporarily missing child. Even though a suspect, Wayne Williams, has been arrested on trumped up charges, she refuses to forget the racism and classism inherent in the investigations which silenced and alienated working class Black families and led to Williams' arrest in order to cease inquiry. Toni Cade Bambara's works beseech us not to embrace amnesia. This issue is of particular significance at the wake of the American government's disenfranchisement of thousands of Black Hurricane Katrina victims. Bambara's works remind us to stay vigilant as now they are being disenfranchised during the voting process and the plans to rebuild New Orleans. Her works ask us not to forget the millions of Black people imprisoned under outdated Black Codes, which are still a part of the United States judicial system and lead to a disproportionate number of incarcerated Black people.

Clara, the main character in "Going Critical," who, like Bambara, struggled with cancer, tells her daughter Vera that she will be of more help to her after she passes on to the next life. Bambara's message to us after she has passed on is to stay ever vigilant, to not forget, to use our voices, and to unify within the Black community and within ourselves to create a whole, healthy, and functional Black community.

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